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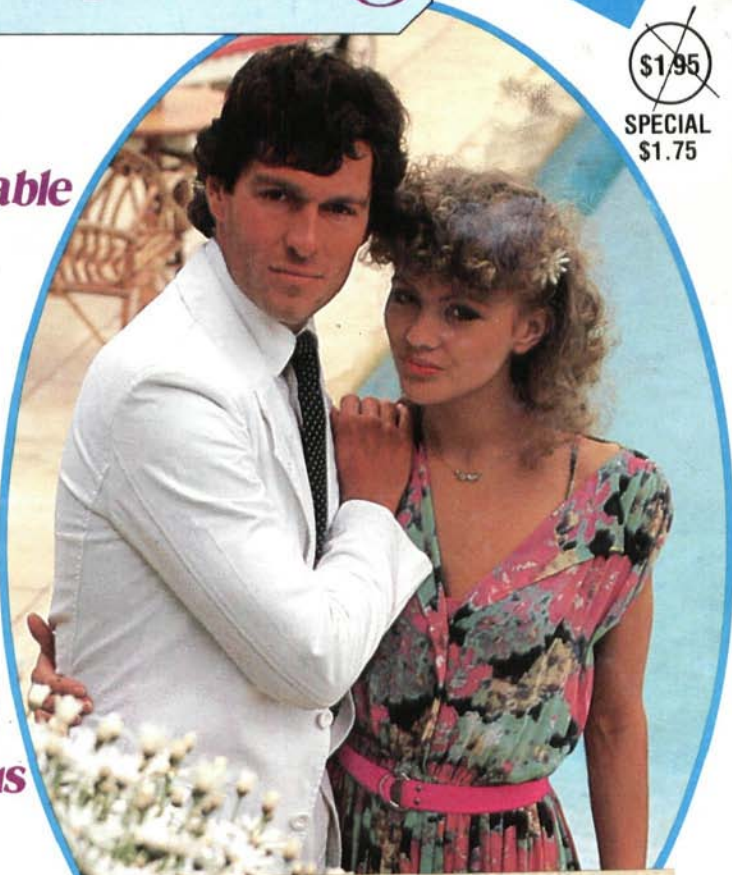
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5 Great Romances

MAY/JUNE 1984 • VOLUME 2 NO. 2

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The Runaway Bride



Heedless of the scandal she creates, beautiful young Consuelo Vasquez defies her Spanish heritage and fights for the right to choose her own husband.

By SHEILA WALSH

In the near-intolerable heat of an August afternoon two horses galloped across the scorched unyielding turf of the Sussex downs. The slighter of the two riders, finding a straggling clump of gorse in her path, put her sturdy mare at it and, with the skirt of her brown habit billowing, cleared it with an exuberant "Huzza!"

Her laughter floated joyously on the still air and Henry, Viscount Linton, following close on her heels, dabbed at the perspiration beading her brow.

"Enough!" he cried at last in desperation. "Consuelo, you are the most complete hand! I can't think how you manage

to raise so much energy in this abominably enervating heat."

In response, Consuelo Vasquez wrinkled her nose at him. It was a delightful nose, short and straight, flaring slightly above a willfully curving mouth.

"But then, mi Enrique, it is clear to me that you have never experienced Bilbao in the height of summer, for if you had, you would not find this present weather so intemperate."

"Maybe," admitted the young man, unconvinced. "But it ain't something I'd care to hazard money on. Anyway, I decree that we stop and rest for a while."

From THE RUNAWAY BRIDE by Sheila Walsh. Copyright © 1983 by Sheila Walsh. Published by arrangement with The New American Library, Inc. All rights reserved.

Without waiting for an answer, he dismounted and turned to lift his companion down. Her waist was so tiny that his hands all but encompassed it as he swung her to the ground. Eyes as black and bright as ripe sloes looked wickedly aslant at him from under winged brows.

"Only two months! It does not seem possible. I can scarcely remember a time when I did not know you," Consuelo said happily.

He crouched down and tipped the delicately pointed face up to him. "And I," he said, "can scarcely bear to contemplate a future without you."

Consuelo put up a hand swiftly to cover his. "It will not happen, *querido*," she told him confidently.

"Have I not said?" she continued when he was comfortably settled beside her. "I mean to remain here in England so that we may be married."

"You have said it, my lovely Consuelo"—his lordship sighed—"but you are not free to choose, and if you were, what have I to offer you except my name? If you were not so absurdly young..."

"I am seventeen—almost eighteen years! In Spain that is not so young..."

But she fell silent nonetheless, remembering that she should by now be back home in Bilboa, to be married on her birthday to the hateful Don Miguel Alphonso de Aranches, who was very old—almost as old as her father—and who wore corsets that creaked when he bowed.

Lord Linton observed the sudden pensive frown. "I am right, am I not, dearest? And there's the rub, for every time I see a carriage approaching the house, I fear that it will be your father come to carry you back to Spain."

Consuelo's profile took on an imperious tilt. "It will not be so, I promise you.

My father will by now have received my letter. Lord Covington has also written on our behalf. So you see"—she laid a slim gloved hand on his arm—"by now it must be quite clear to him that my whole life is here with you. He cannot then force me into this marriage which is so utterly *repugnant* to me!"

"I hope you are right."

"Of course I am right," she declared, confident once more. "You will see. We are indeed fortunate to have Lord and Lady Covington for our allies, are we not? Only consider, *querido*—if you had not been Lady Covington's very good friend, we might never have known one another!"

Lady Covington was alone in the yellow drawing room when her butler, Hepworth, announced to her that there was a gentleman below seeking audience.

"Well, I suppose I had better see him. You may show him up, Hepworth."

When Captain Bannion was admitted, she saw at once that he was a very physical man, not destined to shine in a lady's drawing room; not more than thirty, she decided, and a little above medium height, he had the deeply bronzed look of a man more used to spending his time in the open air. Yet for all that, his coat was well cut—though it was clear that he favored comfort rather than elegance since it had been made so that he could shrug himself into it without assistance. And his buckskins displayed an excellent leg.

Also, he did have the most devastatingly blue eyes, Verena decided as she gestured gracefully for him to be seated.

"Is your business of a confidential nature, Captain Bannion?" she inquired huskily as he took the chair opposite her.

"No, ma'am. I am here on behalf of Senor Vasquez. He is much vexed by his

daughter's continuing absence from home." His keen eyes challenged her. "I understand she was to have returned home several weeks since."

"That is true." She met his glance with limpid innocence. "But surely Consuelo wrote to her father to explain. I also wrote. Has the good senor not received these letters?"

"No! Absolutamente, no! I will never submit to you!"

"Oh, but you will," he said with a soft vehemence that was more disturbing than mere anger.

"He has." The captain's tone was curt. "It is as a direct result of receiving them that I am here now to escort Senorita Vasquez home without further delay. I must ask you, ma'am, to summon her so that arrangements may be put in hand."

Lady Covington raised her finely plucked brows in amused surprise. "Just like that, Captain?"

"My time is precious, ma'am. I have commitments. . . ."

"I will not pretend that I have not expected something of this nature, though I had supposed Senor Vasquez would wish to deal with the matter personally."

"Had it been possible, he would have done so. Regrettably, the senor's health at the present time precludes any undue exertion."

"I see. And so he sends you." She spoke as though the thought amused her.

It did not, however, amuse him. "No one sends me anywhere, Lady Covington.

I agreed to lend Senor Vasquez my support in this affair because he was ill and distressed and because the speedy return of his daughter is of paramount importance to him. It touches upon his honor."

"Senor Vasquez will have told you, I suppose, that the child fancies herself in love?"

"At seventeen?" His mouth curled derisively. "Romantic twaddle, ma'am. In twelve months' time, I doubt she will even recall the young man's name."

There came an interruption in the form of a light rap on the door. It was flung open to admit a tiny glowing figure in rich brown velvet, a froth of lace at her throat, her dark eyes brilliant.

"Dear Lady Covington, Hepworth has said that you wish to see me. We have had a splendid ride. . . ." Consuelo's voice trailed away as she saw that her ladyship was not alone. "Oh, forgive me, I did not know. . . ."

Lady Covington extended a graceful hand. "Come, child, and be introduced. Captain Bannion, my dear, is a friend of your father."

Consuelo stared blankly as he bowed.

"Good afternoon, Senorita Vasquez." His voice was dry. "I am sorry to break in upon your pleasures with such distressing abruptness, but I have come to take you home to your father."

There was a curious little silence during which Captain Bannion waited with frowning formality.

Consuelo meanwhile stood unmoving, a great fear clutching at her stomach.

"This I do not believe!" she cried. "My father would not send such a one as you to do this thing!"

The captain's face wore its most shuttered look. "Believe what you will, senorita, it is the truth, and you had better accept it. I am a busy man and have little

time to pander to tantrums."

"No! I will not leave this place without my Enrique!"

"Oh, for pity's sake, spare me any more of this Cheltenham tragedy!" Bannion turned to Lady Covington. "Madam, perhaps you can instill a little sense into this child?"

"I am not a child!"

Her ladyship's brows arched delicately. "Perhaps, sir, you might show a little more tolerance." As he flushed angrily she turned to Consuelo. "My dear, Captain Bannion is acting for your father. If he insists that you return home, there is little that any of us can do."

Consuelo turned on her trimly booted heel and marched to the door.

"Senorita!" His voice—the voice his crew knew so well—stopped her before she ever reached it. "I have a letter here for you from your father. I advise you to read it and digest its contents well."

Consuelo came back, reluctantly, stiff-backed, and with a commendable degree of composure held out her hand for the letter, looked at it and then at him. "You know its contents?"

"I do. Briefly, it requires that from this moment you obey me in all things as you would your father until you are once more beneath his roof."

"No! *Absolutamente*, no! I will never submit to you!"

They stood very close, glittering blue eyes locked with flagrantly defiant black ones. Then:

"Oh, but you will," he said with a soft vehemence that was more disturbing than mere anger.

A moment more their glances held—and it was Consuelo who broke first. Without another word, she drew a sobbing breath and fled from the room.

The delightful girl was, at that mo-

ment, in her own bedchamber, flung down upon her bed in a storm of weeping. There came a sharp little rap on the door and Lady Covington swept in, trailing her pale silk skirts.

"Well, child, you *have* set the place in a pucker!"

"Dear Lady Covington, tell me what I am to do," pleaded Consuelo. "I cannot go with that man when my whole happiness is here."

Verena, knowing exactly what she intended her to do, paved the way with skill. "Do you think that if Henry went to see your father, perhaps...? He is not a nobody, after all. He may be a trifle short of funds at the present, but one day, you know, he will be the Earl of Gratton."

Consuelo shook her head vigorously. "It would make no difference, senora. I am promised to Don Miguel, who is humorless and arrogant and incredibly old!" The words rang like a knell. "In my country such a promise is binding until death—and if I am forced to marry Don Miguel instead of Enrique I think I *shall* die!"

"Then we must ensure that you do not have to marry him."

"I do not understand..."

"You are but an infant in your dealings with men, my dear. Captain Bannion, for example..."

"I hate him!" Consuelo spat the words.

"You have made that abundantly clear," said Lady Covington dryly. "But you will never get the better of a man like the captain with such tactics. You should be thanking me, you know. I have been working very hard on your behalf."

"You have made him change his mind?" the girl asked.

This was greeted with a light trill of laughter. "My dear, I am not quite a miracle worker!" And as Consuelo's ex-

pression fell: "But I have been rather clever, I think. I have persuaded the good captain that he has been less than fair to you and that he should postpone his departure until the morning following my ball."

"I do not see how that can do any good," said Consuelo.

"Oh, come now—only think! A lot can happen in two days. I see no reason why you and Henry, if you give your minds to it, should not outwit Captain Bannion."

Consuelo's dark eyes grew round and then began to sparkle. "You mean... elope?" She said the word half fearfully. "Can we do such a thing?"

She flew into his arms with a joyful cry, and he gathered her to him with all the ardor for which her romantic soul yearned.

"It is your only chance," said Lady Covington bluntly. "But it must be planned with care. You may leave that to me. I shall speak to Henry..."

"May I see him, please?"

"Later, child. I will arrange it. But from now until Friday, you must do exactly as I tell you. It is settled that Captain Bannion will stay here for the remainder of his visit—I have persuaded him that it will give him the chance to know you better. What I wish of you is that you behave as though you are growing resigned to your lot. Can you do that?"

"But, yes!" Consuelo danced around the room. "If you can do this thing for us, dear Lady Covington, we shall bless you forever!" She rose, all hauteur. "And I shall play my part when I meet the wicked captain with great conviction, you will

see! I shall be heartbroken, but terribly brave!"

"Yes, well don't overdo it, my dear. I think perhaps for this evening it might be more prudent, and more in keeping with your state of mind, if you do not come downstairs for dinner."

It was not easy for Consuelo to remain quietly in her room. However, it was not long before Lady Covington summoned her to her boudoir. There her Enrique awaited her. She flew into his arms with a joyful cry, and he gathered her to him with all the ardor for which her romantic soul yearned.

"Ah, my dearest love, how I wish I had been there to support you," he whispered into her ear. "But, have no fear, the arrogant captain shall not be permitted to carry you off in such a cavalier fashion!"

"That is better," Lady Covington pronounced. "Now then, Consuelo. Between us, Henry and I have evolved a plan, which, if everyone plays their parts as I hope they will, should give you an excellent chance of deceiving Captain Bannion for as long as it takes you to make good your escape. But it involves the exercise of patience." She looked severely at them both.

"I still think we should go tonight," said Henry with unexpected obstinacy. "Can't see the value in kicking our heels here for another couple of days—having to be polite to that man!"

"You are right, *querido*." In her enthusiasm Consuelo could not remain quiet.

"Can you think of no one but yourselves?" Lady Covington demanded. "Do you realize how long I have spent in preparations for my ball on Friday evening? Over two hundred guests are invited. And all will be wrecked if you are minded to be selfish." They both looked so astonished that she forced herself to be

calm. Her beautiful green eyes reproached them gently. "Is it so much to ask that you wait a little longer?"

Consuelo was immediately contrite. "Dear Lady Covington, you have been so good, so kind! We will do whatever you think best." She looked at Henry severely. "Will we not, *querido*?"

He shrugged assent.

"That is better," Lady Covington said, mollified. "I promise you it is for the best. You will not leave until just before dawn on Saturday morning. Everyone will by then be asleep. You, my dear Consuelo, will plead tiredness at midnight. Yes, my dear," she insisted as the girl looked set to argue, "for you will need to get a little sleep. Is your maid to be trusted?"

"Oh, Maria will do anything I ask of her," said Consuelo confidently. "She is devoted to me!"

"Good. That will be useful. But not a word to her beforehand." Lady Covington yawned delicately and stood up. "And now, my dears, you must go away so that I may finish dressing for dinner."

Consuelo ate dinner alone and was bored. "I shall take a walk in the garden," she informed Maria after prowling around the room restlessly for some time.

"But, *senorita*—it is almost dark!"

"So? What has that to say to anything?"

"Do you wish that I accompany you?" asked the reluctant maid.

"Certainly not." Consuelo was very definite. "I wish to be quite by myself."

The evening air enfolded Consuelo with all the softness of the fine lacy shawl she had draped about her shoulders. Her thoughts turned irresistibly to home. It distressed her that she must go against her father's will.

Was it this thought which prompted the sudden guilt that assailed her...the possibility that she might have con-

tributed by her behavior to this illness of which Captain Bannion had spoken—might even have been its cause?

Nick Bannion had watched her moving across the darkening lawns, her pale gossamer skirts lifting and settling about her feet as she came. He tossed away his cigar and stepped forward. She tensed but did not move, watching him warily.

"Good evening, *Senorita Consuelo*." His voice sounded deeper, more resonant out-of-doors, and it held a strong underlying vein of satire. "I trust you are recovered?"

"Recovered?" A small frown appeared.

"Lady Covington explained to the assembled company that you were indisposed," he said smoothly.

"Oh...yes. Thank you. I am better."

"I am pleased to hear it. Still, I am not sure that you should be out here alone—or were you perhaps hoping not to be alone for long?"

Consuelo said austere, "If you mean I to have a secret assignation with Enrique, then I am not."

"I see. Perhaps that is why your young gallant spent the whole of dinner glowering at me!"

"You cannot expect him to love you!" she retorted swiftly, then, remembering her promise to Lady Covington, fell silent again.

"Lady Covington tells me that I have been clumsy in my dealings with you. If that is so, then I am sorry."

Consuelo threw him a swift, incredulous look.

"Not," he added, lest she mistake him. "that it changes anything. I meant every word I said earlier. However, I could perhaps have expressed myself more tactfully."

Her shoulders sagged perceptibly as the thread of hope vanished. She said in a

very contained way, "It matters little how it is said. The message is the same."

"Perhaps if Lord Linton were to go in person to your father, he might listen?"

She looked steadily up at him. "Do you think it?"

"No, *senorita*," he admitted. "I fear it would be of little use."

"That is honest, at least." Her shoulders lifted. "What is to be, will be."

It sounded very much like an admission of defeat. Nick felt a pang of regret as he bent to pick up his coat, which lay folded on the grass. "I had better rejoin the dinner guests," he said without enthusiasm. "One can only stretch the smoking of a cigar so far."

"Surely, Captain, you will not deny Consuelo and Lord Linton these last moments of happiness?"

He hesitated, realized there was nothing more he could say and turned to leave. "Then I will bid you good night," he said abruptly.

"Senor. . ."

He had taken only a few steps when she called after him.

"*Senorita*?" He half turned.

"Is my father very ill?"

The question surprised Nick almost as much as the uncertainty with which it was uttered. He walked back and put a hand under her chin, feeling the resistance as he forced it up. "You are thinking of what I said?" She signified assent. "Well I will not conceal from you that I am concerned to see him looking so frail, but then we had not met for some months. Perhaps

you would not notice so great a change." There was something in her eyes which made him say a little roughly, "Do not distress yourself, *senorita*. Your safe return will serve him as well as any physic."

The day of Lady Covington's ball dawned clear, and the house was astir from an early hour as the preparations of the past two days reached their climax. Then the evening progressed and the ball got under way. Consuelo appeared to be enjoying herself prodigiously.

She endeared herself to all and was never wanting for a partner, moving from one dance to the next with seemingly boundless energy.

"Would that one were seventeen again!" Verena Covington sighed with a light laugh that barely concealed her vexation.

Nick looked down at her with a gleam of amusement. He glanced across the room to where people were beginning to drift together for the waltz. "I wonder, would you excuse me?" He bowed and strode purposefully away.

Consuelo had been taken aback when Captain Bannion had expressed a wish to dance with her.

"Are you enjoying your ball?" he asked as he whirled her expertly about the room.

"Thank you, yes." It was shyly said, for his closeness confused her and the dance was making her breathless. To be sure, the captain did not have as light a touch or move with Enrique's grace, but there was an exhilaration, a vitality in the way he waltzed, a disturbing sureness in the way he held one.

"You are certainly very popular," he observed dryly. "It required a great deal of persistence on my part to secure this dance with you."

She glanced up at him pensively through her lashes. "I did not suppose that you would wish to do so."

"Not wish to dance with the most beautiful young lady in the room? For shame, *senorita!*" His voice, softly teasing, disturbed her. "You may have cast me as the villain, but even a villain must be granted an occasional boon!"

She could feel a warmth stealing into her face and knew that her embarrassment was due as much to guilt as any other cause. If he could but know what a trick she was about to serve him, how different would be his manner. But a swift recollection of what was at stake stiffened her resolve. She could not allow any qualms of conscience to sway her now.

Nevertheless she felt obliged to say in fairness: "You are not so bad! Indeed, you have shown a tolerance greater than I had any cause to expect and I would like to . . . to thank you!"

As the night wore on, Consuelo's unremitting energy was the object of much envy and some speculation. Henry eventually took her arm and shot her a meaningful glance. "It is almost two o'clock, my dear. Don't you think . . .?"

"But I am not in the least tired! Just one dance, Enrique, and *then* I will think."

Lady Covington was at the far end of the ballroom when Henry led Consuelo out onto the floor.

"That child should be in bed." Nick Bannion's voice behind her was severe and made her jump. "She will scarcely be fit to travel at this rate."

"Surely, Captain, you will not deny Consuelo and Lord Linton these last moments of happiness?"

He was quizzical, his eyes straying from hers to watch the graceful figures at that moment performing a lighthearted *tour de main*. "Isn't that being a trifle

melodramatic? From what is, I admit, a brief acquaintance, I would hazard that the *senorita* at least is possessed of far more resilience than you give her credit for!"

"Well, of course she is! I am sure that no one can seriously suppose that Consuelo's heart will be irrevocably broken when she leaves here! But even so . . . Ah, there you are, my dears." Verena was all sympathetic concern as the young couple came toward them, laughing, swinging hands. "Consuelo, my dear child, I really do think it is time you retired. You have a long day before you, and Captain Bannion has been so accommodating that I feel we should make every effort to abide by his wishes now."

Consuelo stood proudly erect, a little tragic, as she bade them good night and turned away with Henry, who had been permitted to walk with her to the stairs.

"I will come to you shortly, my love!"

Safe in her room at last, the confused emotions of the past few hours found their release in a sudden rush of tears. Consuelo quickly pulled herself together, however, and submitted to being undressed.

"You need not worry about me anymore, Maria," she said in a choked voice. "I promise you, I am quite resigned to what must be. Oh, and you are to wake me at eight o'clock."

"But *senorita*, I thought . . ."

"It is arranged," said Consuelo firmly. "Eight o'clock."

When the maid had gone, she prowled about the room in her nightgown, unable to settle anywhere for more than a moment.

There came a faint scratching on the door and her heart leaped. But it was only Lady Covington. She was carrying the carpetbag containing the stable boy's suit and his hat.

"Now then, you know what you are to

do," she began without preamble, setting it down on the bed. "I am still not sure that it would not have been better to have your maid privy to the secret. If you should fall asleep. . ."

"Dear Lady Covington, I shall not sleep; I *could not sleep*. I shall know exactly when to creep down the back stairs to meet Enrique."

"I was under the impression that you were in love with me—but perhaps I was mistaken."

"Good." Lady Covington nodded, satisfied. "Well, I had better get back to my guests."

"Then I must bid you farewell, dear lady, and thank you for all that you have done for me."

"My love." Lady Covington pressed a cool cheek to Consuelo's and stepped away. "I hope all goes well with you. If so, we should meet again very soon."

As soon as the door had closed, Consuelo tipped the contents of the carpetbag out onto the bed and, unable to wait a moment longer, wriggled out of her nightgown and was soon dressed in shirt and breeches, a colorful kerchief tied at her neck.

"You make a very fine boy, I think," she told her reflection with some pride, preening this way and that. And it was true that her slight figure lent itself perfectly to the groom's clothes, "But your hair will not do like that, *amigo*."

She rummaged feverishly among the piles of baggage for Maria's sewing box and, finding it, extracted a pair of scissors.

"I do not know how well I may achieve this, but. . ." With a frown of deep concentration, tongue pensively caught between her teeth, she clipped her way through her beautiful hair, struggling to reach the very back of it, and resolutely banishing the pangs of loss she felt as the rich silken tresses fell one by one to the floor.

Her watch told her that it was almost time to go. She put on the jacket then quietly opened the door.

Downstairs all was still. Consuelo found her way to the side door without difficulty and slipped out. Light still blazed from the ballroom windows, and she saw faint shapes moving about as the servants began to extinguish the candles one by one.

"Are you there, Enrique?" she called very softly. There was a footfall behind her and she swung around with a soundless gasp. "Oh, it is you, *querido*! Just for one moment I thought. . ."

"Quiet!" Henry commanded edgily. He took her bag and put a hand under her arm. "If we follow this path along the shadow of the yew hedge, it will take us on to the main drive."

Consuelo maintained a discreet silence for some time, sensing that Enrique would have his hands full. Now that they were actually on their way she felt a kind of exhilaration.

"Dawn will be breaking before long," Henry said. "I want to put as many miles between us and Covington Manor as I can before daylight. I shan't stop at Cuckfield; this team should be good as far as Hand Cross, I reckon."

"But surely there will be nothing to fear for sometime?"

"All the more reason to press on as fast as we can," said Henry grimly. "Bannion's no fool, and he's going to be as mad as fire when he discovers that you've

given him the slip. I don't care to meet up with him if I can avoid it!"

Consuelo sighed. This elopment was not at all how she had imagined it would be. Those first few miles in the darkness had been the very stuff of romance, but more and more now Enrique was becoming obsessed with his tiresome horses.

"How far did you say it was to this Gretna Green?"

"Some three hundred and sixty miles," said Henry without taking his eyes or his mind far from the road.

"And how far have we traveled?" Consuelo persisted.

He made a small irritable sound. "Oh, I don't know, about twenty miles, I suppose."

"*Madre de Dios!* But it will take us days!"

"Three days, perhaps. We haven't made bad time at all so far," said Henry huffily, defending the implied slur upon his driving. "And you knew from the start that it was a long way."

"Yes, but I had not then considered..."

"Well, if you don't want to go through with it, now is the time to say so," he snapped.

"When have I said that I did not wish it?" Consuelo cried, equally incensed. "You are putting into my mouth words that I have not said."

"Perhaps. But I have no wish to go tearing about the country on a wild-geese chase! I was under the impression that you were in love with me—but perhaps I was mistaken!" The whip whistled expertly out to point the leaders, urging them to greater effort.

Consuelo glanced at the grim, handsome profile and was horrified. In one more moment they would be quarreling in earnest and the fault was hers. "Ah, *querido*, forgive me! Of course I love

you—*con toda mi alma*. You must not heed my silliness... it is only that I am impatient to arrive!"

"I am sorry," Henry said with a rueful smile. "It was unfair to take out my aggravation on you. Look, we should be in Horley soon. We'll take breakfast there, and then we shall both feel much more the thing. What do you say?"

Her generous acceptance of this olive branch went a long way toward mending his ruffled feelings.

Nick Bannion was up early, dousing his head with cold water to relieve the faint throbbing at his temples. His bag was packed and ready for a prompt start.

He was almost down the first flight of stairs when a scream penetrated the silence above. Instinctively he turned, taking the stairs two at a time. Doors were beginning to open all along the landing as he ran past, while the scream, sustained with surprising vigor and with only the briefest of pauses for breath, made its source comparatively easy to locate.

He arrived on the scene to find the door of a bedchamber flung wide. It required little intellect to deduce that the bedchamber was Consuelo's or that he would find it empty. The maid, Maria, was in tears as she crouched on the floor in front of the dressing table over something which at first he took to be a discarded garment of black silk.

Only when he stooped to touch it did he discover it to be hair—great, raggedly cut swaths of Consuelo's beautiful hair. He gathered up a handful and was shaken by a wave of anger at the desecration of something so exquisite.

He stood up to find that a small crowd had gathered in the doorway in a motley array of night attire, but before he could speak, the crowd parted to admit Lady Covington.

"Why, whatever is wrong? Captain Bannion, where is Consuelo?"

"Where indeed, ma'am?" Apart from a harsh little laugh, his voice was carefully expressionless, though his eyes blazed. He was, in fact, cursing himself for not foreseeing this turn of events. "I very much fear the bird has flown the coop."

"Flown?" She was admirably composed. "Why, whatever can you mean—flown?"

"I mean, ma'am, that Senorita Vasquez has gone—run away. And I shall own myself very much surprised if Linton is not also found to be missing."

"Gracious!" Verena Covington took the long switch of hair he still held, looked at it reflectively for a moment and then tossed it back with the rest. "Silly child," she said, and meeting his eyes: "As to Lord Linton, someone will, of course, be sent to his room at once, though I am sure you must be mistaken."

"You will do better to remain silent, my lord, for there is little you can say to justify this day's work!"

"Shall you go after her?"

"I must," he said. "She is my responsibility. Fortunately there is only one direction they can have taken if they mean to marry."

"We cannot be certain, of course, that Lord Linton..."

"I am certain," Nick said harshly.

Nick made good time on the road. His first piece of luck was at Horley, where the landlord recalled the gentleman well.

"Marked him special, I did sir, on ac-

count of how he was regular caring of that young stablehand of his. Took him along with himself to partake of breakfast in my little back parlor there. It's a thing as you don't see happen often, sir."

"Quite so," Nick agreed, downing a pint of the landlord's best brew. "I believe his lordship has quite a fondness for the lad! How long ago would this be?"

The landlord scratched his head. "Well, now; he arrived just as the Brighton coach pulled out, so I reckon it must've been around nine when he left—in a proper fret he was to get on, he was!"

Nick set his tankard down on the table. "Thank you, landlord, you have been most helpful."

At Croyden he was less than two hours behind the fleeing couple and was just beginning to congratulate himself when he lost track of them completely.

By the time he reached Welwyn he was hot and tired and so was the horse which had carried him nobly thus far. His inquiries drew a blank once more. At the White Hart he encountered a most appetizing smell coming from the rabbit, a specialty for which the landlord's wife was renowned. Nick needed little persuading to remain, for he discovered all of a sudden that he was devilishly hungry.

It was when he was embarking upon his second helping of apple pie that sounds of raised voices began to penetrate the dining-room door.

"I do not care, Enrique!" Consuelo's excitable tones were unmistakable. "I cannot go another mile without food!"

"Well, it will have to be something quick."

Nick was across to the door in seconds and had flung it wide.

"*Madre!*" said Consuelo blankly. "How are you here?"

"Never mind how," Nick eyed the trim

little figure grimly, subduing a traitorous inclination to admire the way her boy's raiment became her. His glance lifted to encompass her hair, now hatless, and his cold rage returned in full measure.

"Deuce take it!" Henry muttered. "I knew this would happen!"

The landlord appeared at his elbow. Nick addressed him curtly. "A private room, if you please—and quickly!"

When the landlord had left the room, Henry began, "Now, look here . . ."

But Nick cut him short. "You will do better to remain silent, my lord, for there is little you can say to justify this day's work!"

Indignation got the better of caution. Henry stepped forward, a scowl marrying his fair handsome features. "You are insolent, dammit!"

"Yes, you are!" Consuelo cried furiously, laying a protective hand on his arm. "Also, you are unjust. Enrique has done nothing of which he need to be ashamed. I came with him very willingly!"

Nick turned on her a look of withering derision which raked her from head to foot, making her for the first time very much aware of how revealing were her breeches.

"Your behavior, *senorita*, deplorable as it is, proves only that you are a silly irresponsible girl and in no way exonerates Lord Linton from blame, as he well knows!"

"*Madre de Dios!* You go too far, Captain! I will not permit you to speak so to me!"

His lip curled, but his eyes were like hard blue chips of ice. "Take care, Consuelo," he said softly. "My friends would tell you I am not a tolerant man. Provoke me further and I will use more than harsh words, believe me."

Painful tears blocked Consuelo's

throat and Nick saw that he had silenced her for the moment. He said coldly, "I believe you have a dress with you? Your maid said there was one missing from your baggage. You will oblige me by changing into it at once. I will arrange for a room to be put at your disposal."

The two young people looked at one another, and for a moment the parlor air was charged with all kinds of undercurrents. Then Consuelo shook her head. It was an infinitesimal movement, but Lord Linton shrugged as though accepting the inevitable.

"Very well," she said in a flat little voice. "But I will have to fetch it."

"His lordship will oblige, I am sure." Nick stared pointedly at Henry, who strode to the door, tightlipped. While he was gone, Nick called the landlord and made arrangements for Consuelo to change.

When Henry returned, she took the bag from him with a dignity that made her look oddly piquant in her boy's raiment, and touching his hand for a moment, she said softly, "Do not despair, *querido*."

The captain held the door for her, subjecting her to a close scrutiny as she passed. She returned his look with hauteur.

"Don't be long," he said briefly. "I have a post chaise ordered." Consuelo followed a servant girl to a tiny bed-chamber.

The young maid had watched and waited in an awed silence, which she broke to whisper, "Oh, miss, I wouldn't know you for the same person, straight I wouldn't!"

With a conspiratorial grin Consuelo confided the whole of her adventure thus far, her enthusiasm sometimes leading her into the realms of fantasy.

"And so, you see, this cruel captain has come along to blight our love, and unless we can find a way to escape him I shall be

forced into a life most miserable!"

The much-embellished tale appealed greatly to the impressionable young serving girl. "Oh, miss! Whatever will you do?"

The maid's soulful utterance was cut short by three long blasts on a horn, which announced the arrival of a coach in the yard below them. Consuelo ran to the open window and put her head out.

"Where is it bound?" Do you know? she demanded of the maid.

"'Tis the northbound mail, miss."

Consuelo swung around, her eyes dancing. "Do you suppose...? Oh, if I only had some money!"

There was so much unconscious yearning in her voice that the maid hesitated for no more time than it took to thrust her hand deep into her apron pocket. "Here, miss. It en't much, but it'll get you a goodly way along and then you'll maybe have something that you can sell."

Consuelo saw fresh interest gleam in the man's eyes and his boldness made her feel hot.

Consuelo looked at the coins through a sudden mist of tears. "My thanks," she said huskily. "But I cannot take all your money."

"Oh, but you must! I... I shan't miss it, truly. P'rhaps it'll bring you luck. Only there's no time to dither, see... the coach'll be away any minute now!"

"Very well, then, I will... and *thank you!*" Impulsively Consuelo flung her arms about the startled girl and hugged her. Then she flew about the room, collecting up her things and stuffing them willy-nilly into the carpetbag. "Now... oh, what is your name?"

"Floss, if you please, miss."

"Floss? That is a pretty name. Well, Floss, can you get me down the stairs without being seen? And please to try if you can take Lord Linton—he is the fair handsome gentlemen you will find in the parlour below—on one side and tell him what I have done? *Madre de Dios*—I must go!"

Consuelo snatched up the bag and, on an impulse, unpinned the tiny pearl brooch at her throat and pressed it into the maid's hand. "There! It is of no great value, but it is quite pretty, I think. No, no, take it! You can wear it with your Sunday dress. And now," she heaved a sigh and grinned at her co-conspirator—"let us go, quickly!"

Consuelo, wedged between a stout lady with several bandboxes and a man whose coat reeked of ale and stale perspiration, found herself with ample time on her hands in which to reflect upon the possible consequences of her own impetuosity.

A deep depression settled on her spirits, which was not much relieved by a rakish-looking gentleman opposite her who ogled her constantly.

The stout lady obviously disliked the man's attitude also, for she glared him out of countenance before turning with some difficulty, laden as she was, to face Consuelo. "On your own, are you, dearie?" She wheezed in a kindly protective way.

Consuelo nodded.

"Surprised at your family, letting you travel alone, I am." She glared once more at the man and lowered her voice dramatically. "You can't be too careful, mark my words!"

"No, I am sure that you are right, senora, but"—Consuelo improvised hastily—"you see, I have no family in England, and am on my way to... to friends at Stamford."

"Foreign, are you, then?"

Consuelo saw fresh interest gleam in the man's eyes. His boldness made her feel hot. "You're to be met at Stamford, are you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said briefly.

"Quite a coincidence, that. I'm bound for Stamford also. Suppose your friends don't show up?" he pressed. "Not at all the thing, a pretty young woman like yourself stranded all alone in a strange town—in a strange country, too, by all accounts!"

For the first time she felt a lurch of fear; it must have communicated itself to the lady, for she patted her hand reassuringly. "That's none of your business, sir... and I'll thank you to remember it!"

There was a loud oath from the coach driver, joined by other voices, and the whole framework shuddered as the brake was hastily applied.

"Now what?" The rake sighed as, amid the pandemonium above, there was mention of something blocking the road ahead. He moved toward the door, but before he could reach it, it was wrenched open and a figure filled the aperture—a blessedly, familiar figure.

"Captain Bannion!" Consuelo exclaimed faintly, quite disproportionately glad to see him.

"Senorita," he returned with an enigmatic lift of one black eyebrow. "This is the end of your journey, I believe?"

A babel of surprise, conjecture and eagerly proffered advice ensued throughout the carriage while Consuelo sat, unable to move, her eyes locked with his.

Behind him the guard was in a belligerent mood. "This 'ere is most irregular, sir—the stopping of a public coach upon the Kind's highway without proper cause! And I must warn you that this weapon is

loaded..."

"Give me your bag, Consuelo," said Nick calmly.

She came out of her reverie and did so, preparing thereafter to squeeze herself out of the seat.

"Is Enrique with you?"

"Can you doubt it?" he said sardonically. "Come now. We are holding up the driver and all these good people."

"Yes, of course." She turned to the woman who had helped her with quaint courtesy. "I am in safe hands, I promise you. And thank you, senora, for all your great kindness to me. May God go with you."

"Why, bless you, dearie! You see as you take care, now!"

This last was shouted as Consuelo was lifted and swung away out of view amid a chorus of good-byes. Henry, at a signal, moved his curricule out of the path of the stage, and the driver whipped up the horses.

"I am so very glad that you came!"

It wasn't at all what she had meant to say. Nick's black brows came together in a most forbidding way, and she braced herself for what must follow.

"Are you?" he said in a strangely unemotional voice. His eyes had opened a little wider and seemed as though they would never look their fill. At last he lifted a finger and ran it lightly down the curve of her throat. "I ought to wring that beautiful little neck," he said softly.

She stood there unmoving, incapable of speech, but with a wild singing in her blood that she had never known before, her head full of incoherent thoughts. It must be the result of so much traveling.

It was Henry, driving up in the curricule and demanding to know if she was all right, who brought her back to reality. She gave herself a quick mental shake and withdrew her gaze from the captain,

covering her confusion with a show of spirit.

"Are you all right?" Henry asked abruptly.

"Here," he said softly, raising her up so that he could slip his arm behind her to draw her close.

"Yes, of course, I am all right. Whyever should I not be?"

"Because, you idiotish girl, it was a cork-brained idea, rushing off like that!"

Well, really! She had expected to be rebuked by the captain, but she had not looked to be censured by her beloved! "I am not idiotish and it was a splendid idea! Furthermore, I managed very well for myself, I might tell you!"

"Maybe, but suppose we had not been able to come up with you so soon, what then?"

We? Had he then gone over to the enemy? She felt suddenly dispirited.

Nick prepared to lift her into the curricl and for a moment his voice hardened. "I don't know if I need to say it, but there will be no more running away."

"Of course not," she sighed. "I can quite see that it is of little use." She would not meet his eyes as he swung her up and climbed in beside her so that they were close-packed together.

"This will be a bit of a squeeze, I'm afraid, but it won't be for long. Lord Linton will take us back to Welwyn and from there we will take the post chaise which I have already ordered, while he drives back to London ahead of us to dispose of his curricl before joining us at the dock." Nick turned to Henry. "I must ask you to

make all speed, my lord. I am determined to leave on the evening tide, and if you aren't there, I shall sail without you."

Consuelo was not sorry when they were at last in the post chaise and on their way to London. It was certainly more comfortable than the curricl, and soon she was leaning back with a sigh, resigned for the moment to whatever fate might decree.

It did seem very strange to be traveling in a closed carriage with only Captain Bannion for company. She had thought she had grown to know him quite well, but now an unaccountable shyness overcame her, and as if he sensed her difficulty, he went out of his way, it seemed, to set her at ease.

Soon they were conversing together most amiably, though occasionally his voice went far away and she was obliged to stifle a yawn. He was in the middle of a most entertaining story about one of his adventures during the war when her head, which had drooped more than once, finally sank against his arm.

Nick, caught in midsentence, looked down at her in wry amusement, which faded as he studied the face now relaxed in sleep, dark lashes fanning out across her cheek and her mouth still curved into a smile from something he had been saying. She had borne up bravely considering that it must be all of thirty-six hours since she had slept.

"Here," he said softly, raising her up so that he could slip his arm behind her to draw her close. She sighed and snuggled her head against his chest, and he felt again the sudden rush of emotion he had experienced upon finding her unharmed in that wretched stagecoach. He had stood there like a fool, staring at her, when all the time he was longing to take her in his arms.

Consuelo was still sound asleep when the post chaise arrived at the London

docks. And here at last was the *Spanish Laddy* moving gently at her moorings. Nick managed to lift Consuelo down from the chaise without waking her, and as he carried her up the gangplank he noticed with approval that Bob Fletcher was waiting for him. Yet Nick sensed an uneasiness about his first mate. His pleasant features wore a troubled frown as he beheld Nick's burden.

Nick at once jumped to conclusions. "Don't tell me that those confounded women haven't arrived?"

"Oh, they've arrived, right enough. Leastways..."

Before he could complete the sentence there was a faint clattering of feet on the companionway and a head emerged, an outrageously stylish bonnet tied becomingly under one ear.

"Good God!" said Nick blankly.

Verena Covington stepped gracefully up on the deck, her green eyes resting thoughtfully on Consuelo's sleeping form cradled so intimately in his arms.

"Good evening, Nicholas," she said with a lift of her delicate brows. "We were beginning to wonder if you would come in time."

Consuelo stirred, and for a moment wondered where she was.

Out of sheer curiosity she opened her eyes—and found Captain Bannion's face close above her. He looked very stern, but as she uttered a little exclamation he looked down at her, and for a moment his expression softened.

"Well," he said. "When you sleep, you sleep!"

She felt the color creeping into her face. "I am sorry. Please, you may put me down now!"

He did so, but kept a steadying arm about her. Consuelo turned her head and realized that they were on board ship, and in the same moment she saw Lady Cov-

ington.

"Oh, it was you! I thought I had dreamed your voice. But I don't understand..."

"It is really quite simple, my dear. Your duenna is unfit for the journey and I am to stand in her place."

"Oh, but...there is surely no need..." Consuelo stammered.

Lady Covington's laugh tinkled. "My dear child...as if I could think of your returning to your papa so ill chaperoned!"

Captain Bannion called forward a man with sandy-colored hair and a shy smile, introducing him to Consuelo and bidding him to escort her below where Maria awaited her.

"Then get back here pretty sharpish, if you please, Mr. Fletcher. The wind is veering and enough time has been wasted already."

"But...Enrique?" cried Consuelo.

"I am sorry, senorita," Nick was curt with her. "But Lord Linton knew my intentions. If he is not here within the next ten minutes we must sail without him."

Below, in a tiny cramped cabin that had been skillfully adapted to accommodate three females, Consuelo was reunited with Maria. Then, almost as the ship began to move, there came a great to-ing and fro-ing above and a clattering on the companionway. There was a sharp rap on the door and it opened to admit Lord Linton.

"Lord!" he exclaimed as Consuelo spun around. "That was a close-run thing! They were just hauling in the gangplank!"

"Cheer up, Consuelo," he continued, seeing her worried look. "Only consider, when we return, it will be as man and wife."

She could not share his certainty and so did not reply. The brim of her bonnet hid her face so that he could not read her ex-

pression, but it did occur to him that she was behaving very oddly.

"That is what you want, is it not?" he demanded urgently. "I mean...you haven't changed your mind?"

"Oh, I am sorry, Enrique!" Consuelo made a determined effort to pull herself together. She turned to him, stretching out her hand impulsively. "I am behaving very badly, I know. But today has been so strange. Do you not find it so? I feel... oh, I do not know exactly how I feel, but it is not the least like myself."

"Well, it ain't every day you set out to elope!" He half grinned. "Lord, it seems like a lifetime since we left Covington Manor."

"Do you love me, little Consuelo?" he asked softly.

"Yes, of course I do!" she declared with so much fervor that he was taken aback.

Supper that evening was not the easiest of meals, but after supper, they remained in the surprisingly spacious saloon. Lady Covington declined to play cards, but sat watching the young couple's good-natured squabbles over a game of brag in a brooding silence and finally excused herself, pleading a slight headache. Consuelo soon made her own excuses to retire.

Henry saw that her face was smudged with weariness. He held out a hand. "Come and take a turn on deck first? Decidedly beneficial, you know—a little exercise before retiring."

Consuelo hesitated—and then sighed. "Very well, *querido*."

It was very strange on deck, as though

they were in a vast shadowy void through which the schooner cleaved its way with instinctive sureness.

Henry watched the pensive profile of the girl at his side for a moment and then traced a finger along the delicate outline of her jaw.

"Do you love me, little Consuelo?" he asked softly.

She started a little at his touch, seeming to come back from a great distance. "Yes, of course I do!" she declared with so much fervor that he was taken aback.

And it was true, she assured herself later as she lay waiting for sleep. Had she not loved Enrique from the very first? Had she not seen in him everything that she might conceivably wish for? Perhaps he was a little too amiable, too easily led on occasion, but that surely could not be accounted a fault.

She slept heavily, lulled by the ship's motion, and awoke early, roused by some sound—a strange monotonous rasping, accompanied by a low moaning noise. She opened her eyes to see the lamp swinging in an ominous arc above her and, lifting on one elbow, found the poor light sufficient to show her Lady Covington lying prostrate, one hand pressed across her eyes as her head moved restlessly back and forth.

Consuelo swung her legs over the side of the cotlike bed and stood upright, staggering as the floor moved beneath her. "Are you feeling unwell, senora?" she asked anxiously, leaning over the older woman. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

The hand lifted momentarily to reveal anguished eyes, which stared resentfully up into the fresh young face. Consuelo was shocked to see the change in her beautiful companion, and as if the thought communicated itself, the hand came down abruptly, and Lady Cov-

ington turned to the wall.

"Go away!" she muttered peevishly. "That girl of yours is tending to me."

Consuelo shrugged, and since there was no sign of Maria she began to clamber into her clothes unaided. She had almost finished when there was a fumbling at the door which opened to admit Maria, clasping a large jug in her arms. The maid looked almost as grayfaced as Lady Covington.

"Oh, poor Maria!" she exclaimed. "You should be lying down also."

"Do not be concerned for me, *senorita*," came the stoical reply. "My condition is not desperate. You had best go," Maria advised, putting down the jug and giving her mistress an encouraging push toward the door—and because Consuelo felt herself unwanted by either of them, she went.

The main cabin was empty, though there were signs that someone had breakfasted there not too long since. There came a quick step and she turned, hoping to see Enrique, but it was only Mr. Fletcher. He blushed, said good morning and hoped that she had slept well.

"Thank you—yes. But Lady Covington did not. I fear she is most unwell." Consuelo sighed. "Is En—Is Lord Linton about yet, do you know?"

"No, nor likely to be in the near future." He nodded sympathetically, seeing her look of dismay. "I'm afraid so—sick as a dog!"

"Oh, no!" she wailed. "Not Enrique, also! How... how very poor-spirited of him..." She stopped suddenly, a hand to her mouth, as she realized how unfeeling that must sound. "Of course, I am very sorry for him. Is he very ill? Can I go to him?"

"Yes he is—and no, I don't advise it," said Mr. Fletcher with a twinkle. "If I were you, I should have some breakfast,

always supposing that you feel like eating."

There was a clatter of feet on the companionway and Captain Bannion came in, pulling off a short thick coat.

"Good morning, *senorita*." As his first officer departed with a cheery smile Nick turned his attention to her, as though he had but that moment seen her. "All alone?"

She explained about Enrique, and about Lady Covington and Maria.

"I am sorry," he said. "Seasickness can be the very devil, and there is little can be done for it. I have a cordial which will ease their thirst, if nothing else. Poor little Consuelo! So you are the sole survivor." The boat pitched and rolled back with a slow pendulum swing. He kept his balance with an ease she could not but admire, and sketched her a bow. "Then will you do your captain the honor of taking breakfast with him, *senorita*? Or are you also feeling queasy?"

Her mouth curved upward enchantingly. "I should be pleased to do so, *senor*. Perhaps it betrays in me a disgraceful lack of sensibility, but to own the truth, I am excessively hungry!"

Nick laughed aloud. "Good girl! We'll make a sailor out of you yet!"

"We are a great trouble to you, I think," she said shyly as she struggled her way through thick unladylike slices of bread and appalling coffee, black and bitter, which she laced heavily with sugar.

Nick denied the suggestion with suitable gallantry.

"Can I come up on deck?"

Nick frowned. "I think not. With conditions as they are, it's no place for a lady."

"Oh, please!" she coaxed. "I should not mind the rough weather, and I promise not to be in anyone's way."

Nick looked into the eager shining face and lifted his shoulders in acquiescence.

"You won't enjoy it much," he warned.

But Consuelo soon proved him wrong. She enjoyed the whole experience enormously. After staring out across the water for several minutes, she made her way crablike along the deck to where Captain Bannion stood braced against a stanchion, sighting into some kind of instrument.

He heard rather than saw her, and answered without pausing from what he was doing. He gestured with his head to where a bank of clouds sulfurous and menacing, stretched across the horizon before them.

"A storm?" Consuelo felt a faint flutter of apprehension. A storm on land was one thing, but at sea . . . ?

Consuelo clung to the rail, staring in awe at the heaving, leaden sea where a wave of frightening size seemed to be bearing down on them.

"We'll be lucky to miss it," he mused, not giving her his whole attention. She studied the instrument with some curiosity.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Preparing to measure the altitude of the sun." He glanced down at her, grinning at her air of puzzlement. "A nautical day runs from noon to noon," he explained. "And noon is determined with the aid of this sextant by the moment when the sun reaches its zenith. See . . ." He glanced calculatingly at the sun, then looked into the eyepiece of the instrument, quickly adjusted a clamp on the arm and put it into Consuelo's hands. "Now . . . find the horizon and the sun, and bring them together."

She took the sextant eagerly, squinting down the eyepiece with bated breath. At first she could see nothing and then the horizon came into view, but it was dipping and wavering all over the place.

"Oh, no!" she cried, staggering as the ship lurched. "It won't stay still . . . and I cannot find the sun at all."

He laughed and pulled her in front of him, made a quick adjustment once more and wrapped his arms tightly about her to hold her steady. "Take your time," he said. "Now do you see the sun?"

Its image whirled and danced into view in the tiny mirror, and she squeaked with excitement.

"Carefully now; wait until it just touches the horizon and then tighten the clamp."

She concentrated fiercely, and then with an exultant cry she screwed the clamp tight and held the sextant up to him. He read off the altitude and chuckled softly.

"Have I not done it correctly?" she wailed, lifting to him a face glowing and vividly alive.

"Not quite. But you can't expect to be proficient so soon." Still smiling, he glanced quickly at the sun and Consuelo watched the strong angles of his face as he put the sextant to his eye, completely engrossed in what he was doing. She was suddenly very much aware of his close proximity and wondered if she should move, but remained where she was—a little breathless, for fear of disturbing him.

He seemed to be taking an unconscionable time, moving the arm along the scale, waiting—then all at once, he screwed the clamp firmly and called: "time!"

"You are a little like God, I think." She giggled. "You say it is noon—and behold, it is noon!"

"Oh, we haven't finished yet." He offered a hand invitingly, and without hesitation she put hers into it, her fingers

curling confidently around his.

Together they went below to the chart room. As they passed through the doorway leading from the chart room to the main cabin the ship heaved, throwing her hard against his chest. His arms closed around her for protection and remained there, as, with laughter subsiding, their eyes met—and held. His were very brilliant, very blue, and there was something in their depths that induced in her a sweet suffocating sensation; there was a weakness in her limbs so that she would have fallen had he not been holding her so tightly.

“Consuelo?” he murmured softly, half wonderingly.

“Senor?”

His head was bent very close. He was about to kiss her, she knew, and in a corner of her mind she wondered why she had never felt remotely like this when Enrique had kissed her. Her heart was fluttering right up in her throat now, and she was beginning to tremble. She closed her eyes. . . .

“Consuelo?”

It was a different voice, sharp, familiar—coming from a long way off.

But Captain Bannion was already releasing her, setting her firmly on her feet and striding away to assist Lady Covington, who stood swaying just within the doorway of the main cabin.

He reached her side and she leaned heavily upon him as he guided her toward the settee. “I feel so stupidly weak”—she sighed in answer to his terse inquiry, her voice no more than a thread of that initial sharp utterance—“but I felt I could no longer neglect my responsibility for dear Consuelo. I do hope the child has not usurped too much of your valuable time?”

Nick did not reply.

In the nearby sleeping cabin, Maria shrieked in terror and Consuelo was jerked to her feet, heart pounding, to find herself in near darkness, which in that same instant exploded into eye-searing brilliance to show Lady Covington cowering in her corner, her whimpered “Oh, God! Oh, God!” immediately cut off by a clap of thunder overhead that seemed to be tearing the heavens asunder.

Without even pausing to fetch her cloak, she rushed up on deck—and there halted. “*Madre de Dios!*” she breathed, instinctively crossing herself.

It was like the end of the world.

The sky ahead glowed like a giant caldron, spewing out streams of molten metal that rolled and trickled toward the fiery rim of the horizon, while behind and all about them the towering clouds were being rent into black tattered rags by the lightning, which pulsed and flickered and forked incessantly to the accompanying tumult of crashing thunder.

Consuelo clung to the rail, staring in awe at the heaving, leaden sea where a wave of frightening size seemed to be bearing down on them. She heard Captain Bannion yelling to the crew to “wear ship! All hands wear ship!” as he struggled to master the wheel.

He turned and caught sight of her, and she saw the dawning of horror in his face as he gestured frantically for her to get below. But she was wholly spellbound by the sight before her, and her limbs would not obey her.

And then it was too late.

The water was upon her in a roaring, drowning cascade that flattened her eyelids against her eyes and made breathing an impossibility. She gasped and swallowed a vile, choking quantity of water . . . and in the same moment her hands were wrenched from the rail and she was swept off her feet and flung like a

sodden rag doll with bone-jarring force against the wheel housing.

She came to her senses to hear her name being shouted hoarsely above the roar of the storm. Hands were feeling her limbs, lifting her; she groaned and retched violently from the effects of the swallowed seawater, and finally opened her eyes to find rainlike rods of fiery light in the flash and flare beating down upon her.

"Little fool!" His tongue roughly chastised her over and over. "You crazy little fool, you might easily have been killed!"

His upbraiding had a strangely beneficial effect upon her. "But I am not, as you can see," she gasped, struggling to stand with some semblance of dignity and relieved to see that all around her men were clambering to their feet, having been similarly felled by the torrent. "My head aches a little and I shall have bruises tomorrow, but that is all."

"All!" He ground the words out, scooping her up into his arms despite her protests. "You are confoundedly complacent, I must say!"

She threw a startled glance at Nick, who had at the same moment noticed that something was wrong.

At the head of the companionway she insisted that he put her down. "I can manage very well, I promise you. You really must not concern yourself with me when there are so many important matters needing your attention."

He seemed set to argue, but Mr. Fletcher's voice calling him was too urgent to be ignored. As he set her down she met his

still-lowering glance with what she hoped was a confident smile and made her way slowly and painfully below, where she was met with a shriek of dismay from Lady Covington. Verena reacted as though Consuelo had been some monster dredged up by the storm. Then Henry Linton, who had stumbled, white and shaking, from his cabin at the height of the storm, rose unsteadily from the place where he had collapsed upon learning of Consuelo's extraordinary behavior and grimaced fastidiously upon finding his feet in a pool of water.

"God in heaven, Consuelo! You look... you look... dammit, I'm not sure I wish to confess how you look! Have you run mad? Whatever can have possessed you to venture on deck at such a time?"

It did not seem to occur to either of them to inquire after her well-being. A lump came in her throat. One might be forgiven for expecting some measure of concern if she looked as dreadful as they implied. But then, she concluded grudgingly, they had both been under a measure of strain themselves.

She stood with her sodden dress slowly adding to the wetness of the floor and lifted her hands in a gesture of resignation. "I... had better go now to change out of these clothes."

It seemed that with the passing of the storm, the weather had taken a definite turn for the better and looked to be set fair for good sailing, with blue skies and a warm, stiffish breeze.

Too soon the schooner was into the Bay of Biscay and heading for Bilbao, already visible as a tiny huddle of houses, dwarfed by the might of the Pyrenees, peak upon peak stretching awesomely back into the misty distance and marching westward to join the Asturias.

In spite of herself and how little she had

wished to return, the sight of this land to which she belonged touched some chord deep inside her.

"You are very quiet, Consuelo. Such a pensive profile!" Captain Bannion had come up beside her at the rail. She turned slowly, reluctantly, to meet his eyes. "Not worrying, I trust?"

She shook her head.

As he spoke Henry came up to join them. He looked rather pointedly at the captain's familiar hold upon his affianced, and Nick, without undue haste or embarrassment, released her, his expression enigmatic.

"The place looks deserted. Does Senor Vasquez live far away?"

"About two miles along the Vitoria road." Nick was also eyeing the only visible means of transport with mixed feelings.

"I had better dispatch a messenger to the house. Senor Vasquez can then send his carriage for us."

"Well, thank the Lord for that," Henry said with a grin that concealed his growing nervousness now that the moment of confrontation had almost arrived.

Enrique took her hand for reassurance — whether his or hers she wasn't sure. "Well, Consuelo dearest, this is it," he said, overhearably. "I only hope your papa won't refuse me admittance!"

Verena threw him an impatient look, but Consuelo was more kind, saying, "I am sure he will see you, *querido* . . ."

Sailors were already bringing out the baggage and taking it ashore to be stowed in the carriage. The moment could be delayed no longer. Consuelo took a last wistful look around at the schooner's deck, said a subdued good-bye to Mr. Fletcher, who wished her well in his shy way, and went ashore.

It was for the most part a silent journey, the occupants of the carriage be-

ing individually preoccupied with their own thoughts. Only when the ground became uncomfortably bumpy did Consuelo look out to find that they had left the road and were being driven over a rough track.

She threw a startled glance at Nick, who had at the same moment noticed that something was wrong. He leaned out of the window to shout to the driver, but his summons seemed only to galvanize the man into further excess; he whipped the horses into a frenzy, which sent them hurtling across the ground, bouncing over boulders with a force that only the superb springing of the carriage enabled them to withstand.

Nick, flung off balance, fell back, cutting his forehead on the side of the window as he did so; Verena Covington screamed loud and long and clung frantically to the rich plush hangings; Henry banged on the roof and demanded querulously to know what the devil the driver thought he was about, while Consuelo, heedless of the hideous jolting, sat transfixed by the sight of the dark stain that slowly spread and trickled down Captain Bannion's cheek.

"Senor—you are hurt! Your face—it is bleeding!"

Nick touched it briefly, then took out a handkerchief and pressed it over the cut.

"Is there n-nothing you can do!" sobbed Verena Covington, her beautiful hat knocked askew, unbridled terror in her eyes. "Before we are all k-killed!"

"Nothing," said Nick. "Until this madman decides to call a halt to this crazy ride, there is nothing any of us can do."

Just when it seemed that the springs would take no more punishment, the pace slowed dramatically, the whole vehicle turned around, rocking ominously, and came finally to rest amid a cloud of dust.

"Where are we? What is happening?"

For God's sake, Nicholas, why don't you say something?" Lady Covington's voice teetered on the edge of hysteria.

It seemed a long time before he answered. "I can't answer for the exact location, but I very much fear we have been kidnapped." Her gasp went unheeded as his glance went from face to face of the men before him. Several were very young, but a couple he recognized. "I can even hazard a guess by whom," he said with astonishing calmness, meeting the broad surprised grin on one of the brigands. "What I am less sure about is why."

"Senor Nicholas, is it really you?" crowed one of the men jubilantly. "How overjoyed El Terremoto will be when he discovers!"

"Who is responsible for this?" he demanded softly, but it was the menacing softness of thunder on the verge of explosion.

"His joy will be short-lived if this nonsense doesn't stop here," Nick replied in his most clipped, authoritative voice. "If El Terremoto is now reduced to attacking innocent travelers, I can only exhort him to be more careful in his choice of victims, in the future. And now, if you please, we are pressed for time and are expected, so I would be obliged if you will stand aside and allow us to proceed."

Nick, his mind working furiously, became aware of a scuffling behind him.

Henry, with some confused idea of escaping and going for help, had got the other door open and was down the steps and away before Nick could prevent him. With an oath Nick plunged after him, the driver shouted a warning to his com-

patriots, and there was a confused crackle of musket and pistol as several of the young brigands overzealously ran around the back of the vehicle to pursue the escapees.

Consuelo was out of the carriage in an instant, heedless of Lady Covington's screams that she would be killed, and was running, stumbling over the ground to where Captain Bannion had pitched forward and now lay very still on the ground with Enrique bending over him, ashen-faced and trembling.

"I d-didn't mean. . . " he gasped. "Oh, God, I . . . j-just thought t-to get help, you know. . . he shouldn't have followed me!"

"It does not matter about that, now!" Consuelo was already on her knees, pushing aside the Captain's coat where a jagged tear was even now becoming stained with red, ripping open the shirt beneath to expose the wound in his side, which oozed blood steadily. With fumbling fingers she tore off his neckcloth and folded it into a pad to press over the wound, exhorting Enrique to remove his also. "Quickly, I beg of you! And fold it."

As he complied shakily he was pushed aside by the man the captain had called Paco, who fell on to his knees beside Consuelo.

"*Caramba!*" he muttered, shaking his head. "That such a thing should happen! These young hotheads. . . El Terremoto will be very angry. . . he was as a brother to the Senor Nicholas!"

"Be silent, *estupido*," she said, clenching her teeth to stop their chattering. "Try instead if you cannot contrive to be of use! The captain is not dead yet, nor will he be if we do not allow it."

Consuelo bandaged Nick the best she could and demanded that their kidnappers make a litter to carry him in.

When they finally reached the bandits

campsite, El Terremoto, their leader, was impatiently pacing.

As he recognized his erstwhile comrade and took in his condition, he swore a great oath. His rumbling voice filled the cavern as he turned to fix each of his men in quick succession with eyes suddenly hardened to a dangerous glitter.

"Who is responsible for this?" he demanded softly, but it was the menacing softness of thunder on the verge of explosion. "Point out to me the miserable cur, and I, El Terremoto, will personally cut him into little pieces and serve him up to the fishes in the bay!"

There was an uneasy silence broken by a weary chuckle. "I see that time has not succeeded in blunting the more colorful excesses of that blistering tongue!" It was Nick's voice, sounding weak, but blessedly normal.

Consuelo gasped with relief and promptly burst into tears.

Two days later when Nick opened his eyes, there was a pain in his side that he felt too weary to investigate further. There was a slim young girl in all the freshness of sprigged muslin, sitting beside his bed, her dark head bent in grave contemplation of her hands.

"So it *was* you, Consuelo," he said faintly. "I didn't dream you, after all."

Tears filled her eyes soundlessly and spilled over. "You are better!"

"It is very silly to cry when one is so happy! I must send word to El Terremoto; he also will be pleased."

"He saved your life," she said quickly, determined to be fair.

"Then I must be—and am—indebted to him." Nick frowned. "But that in no way alters the fact that *you* should not be here. I cannot permit him to continue to hold you against your will."

"That sounds like the comrade I

remember!" said El Terremoto from the doorway. He limped across and took Nick's wrist between his fingers. A slow smile spread across his face. "Good. If you will only cease to excite yourself unnecessarily, we shall have you on your feet in no time!"

"Thanks largely to you, I'm told."

The smile became a chuckle. "And to your own personal nursemaid. Would that I might have so formidable an ally, should I ever be similarly placed!"

Nick turned his wrist to grip El Terremoto's hand as the brigand was about to withdraw it. "As to that, we must talk, you and I."

The two men locked glances for a moment. "Very well. But just the two of us, eh?" The brigand turned to Consuelo. "Perhaps, *senorita*, you might go in search of some good nourishing broth for our patient?"

"Yes, of course."

In the great room below she found Enrique stretched out in a chair before a fitful fire.

"From your demeanor, my dear, I infer that our gallant captain is on the road to recovery?"

She turned a shining face to him. "Yes! Is it not splendid? I am come to procure some broth for him."

He caught hold of her arm as she would have turned away. "Well, before you do... Oh, see here, Consuelo, send that fellow on ahead to the kitchen and listen to me for a moment!"

Something in his tone arrested her wandering thoughts. She did as he asked, looking up at him inquiringly.

"The thing is," he went on, "That much is fast becoming clear. The point being that I no longer take first place with you!"

"*Querido*, you must know that I am very fond of you..."

"But you are *in love* with Bannion." He completed the sentence for her, looking angrily aslant into her eyes. She went so pale that for a moment he thought that she might swoon. She didn't, yet her very stillness disturbed him almost as much, her enormous dark eyes seeming to dominate her face. "Are you all right, Consuelo?"

She was a long time answering. "Yes. Just . . . it was strange, hearing you say it like that. I have never attempted to put it into words."

He had to ask. "Is he in love with you?"

A tremor, as though of pain, shook her, but her voice was steady. "I do not think it."

The fool, thought Henry, and then tentatively, not attempting to touch her, he said, "Well then? Surely we can go on as we were?"

She shook her head. "It can never again be as it was," she said with a sad little smile. "We are no longer the same two people, you and I."

"I could make you love me!"

Again she shook her head. "Such a love cannot be forced. It must be freely given without asking for anything in return."

And he knew in that moment that he had lost his chance with her forever.

Now at last she heard the pity, and was gripped by a dreadful premonition. The blood drained from her face. "Tell me," she insisted.

There was a disturbance at the door. One of the brigands came hurrying in,

stopped short upon seeing her, cast a lowering glance about him and demanded to know the whereabouts of his chief. When told, he strode away, taking the stairs two at a time.

Consuelo shrugged and resumed her daydreaming undisturbed until she heard El Terremoto's uneven tread descending.

"Senorita?" There was an inflection in his voice, which, had she been attending, she might have recognized as pity. "Word has come from your father's house."

Her heart gave an involuntary shudder of dismay. "He has paid? So soon? Oh, but we cannot possibly leave at this time! Captain Bannion is not ready to travel."

He limped across the room toward her and, taking her hand, led her to the nearby couch. "Come, we will sit here together and talk."

Now at last she heard the pity, and was gripped by a dreadful premonition. The blood drained from her face. "Tell me," she insisted.

He patted her hand. "The ransom is paid, yes—but not by your father. It is Don Miguel who writes with considerable urgency demanding your immediate release. I grieve to tell you, little one, that your father collapsed upon learning of your capture. Now, the don says, he lies mortally ill, and in his lucid moments asks constantly for you."

"I see. Then I must go." A kind of dull acceptance began to take over. It was foolish, after all, to hope that one could ever escape one's fate.

"I won't go!" she gasped. "Oh, please—say I need not go!"

"You must."

"You are crazy, my friend! Of what use will you be to the little senorita if you insist upon trying your strength too soon? Are we not getting word every day of the good senor? As long as he clings to life,

nothing can happen."

"And if he dies?" Nick's voice was hoarse. "I must see him before it is too late, and every day I delay the odds grew shorter!"

"You really believe that this swaggering hidalgo would spirit the little one with such unseemly haste? Would there not be talk?"

Nick shrugged. "Much he would care for that. With a fortune the size of Consuelo's almost within his grasp, my guess is that he'll seek to secure it with all speed."

The brigand flung out his arms. "The more you tell me, the more impossible do I find your expectation that you can remove the little one without force. Listen, my friend, you have but to say the word and I will have her away from that place in a trice!"

A faint answering smile lit Nick's eyes. "It may come to that yet. But we will try it my way first."

But it was too late. . . . Nick repeated his distress at the death of his old friend. It was coolly received by Don Miguel Alphonso de Aranches, who did not invite him to sit; instead he subjected him to a hard stare and, in a light but incisive voice, harangued him upon his incompetence in allowing his party to fall into the hands of brigands.

Nick kept his temper with an effort and allowed the don to finish.

"The shock of learning that his daughter was in the hands of such villainous men was more than the senor's delicate constitution could withstand. In the long run, I fear, it proved fatal."

"I am sorry." Nick's hands curled into angry fists until the nails bit deep, but still he would not be drawn.

"You may safely leave Consuelo to me."

"Surely that is for her to decide. If you

will be so good as to inform her that I am here, I think you will find her more than willing to see me."

"I think you do not fully understand. Captain Bannion. Consuelo is no longer your concern, having been given solely into my charge. You may be sure that she is in good hands. My sister is her constant solace."

"You take too much upon yourself, senor. My obligation was to Consuelo's father, and I shall not consider it discharged until I hear from Consuelo's own lips that she is content. I refuse to leave until I have seen her."

"You are a very foolish man, Captain."

He strutted across the room to the door and flung it open. "Leo, you will inform Dona Isabella that she is to bring your mistress down to the study immediately."

The door opened and Consuelo entered with an overpoweringly large older woman looming protectively at her shoulder.

"Put back your veil, Consuelo. You have a visitor."

"Are you all right, dearest?" he asked urgently, taking advantage of the English that the don and his sister did not understand.

She nodded, her mouth going wildly awry at the endearment. "And you?" she asked, low-voiced. "How pale you are. You should not. . . ."

Impatiently, he dismissed her concern. "I am deeply sorry about your father."

Once more she nodded.

Frustration gripped him. Abandoning caution, he stepped forward to take her hands. Again he felt that involuntary response which leaped into life before it could be controlled. "Consuelo," he began forcefully, very much aware of the intimidating shadow of Dona Isabella.

"I do feel, Captain Bannion, that you might accord us the politeness of conduc-

ting your conversation in Spanish."

"Consuelo," he repeated, holding her hands very firmly and speaking slowly and distinctly. "I want you to come with me now, away from this place, back to the *Spanish Lady*. We will sail for England tonight and be married at the first possible moment."

"Ah, no!" It was an agonized whisper. Her fingers gripped his painfully tight and she seemed to sway. But almost at once she recovered. "It is not possible," she said in a stifled voice.

"Anything is possible!" he insisted.

She shook her head with unbearable resignation.

"That will do, Captain. This affecting little scene has gone far enough." Don Miguel's voice flicked like a lash.

"No, by God! It has not!"

"Yes, by God, it has. You have had your answer. Now, you will oblige me by unhanding my wife!"

His wife! Nick's ears heard the words, heard the unmistakable ring of truth in them, but his mind totally rejected them. He still clung to Consuelo, feeling her despair, aware that if he released her she would fall, and marveling at her fortitude.

"The padre performed the ceremony at the senor's bedside shortly after midnight," the shrill voice continued inexorably. "It was the last wish of Consuelo's father. He died very soon after, content that his child was in safe hands."

"Safe!" The mist cleared from Nick's eyes. "Is that what you call it?" He summoned all his strength and shook Consuelo. "Listen to me, *querida*. A marriage like this, agreed to under duress, can be set aside..."

"No." Her head moved warily. "I gave my father a solemn promise..."

"For pity's sake, Consuelo! Don't be a fool! You can't throw away your whole life and hope of happiness because of

some idiotic deathbed promise extracted under God knows what emotional pressures! It's—damn it, it's archaic!"

But he knew he had lost the argument, for though she flinched at his words, with her father still lying upstairs hardly cold, the events were too seared on her mind to be lightly put aside. And his resources of strength were exhausted, though a slow unrelenting rage consumed him.

"Can you deny that my wife is on this ship?" he squeaked.

"I have not laid eyes on Consuelo since this morning."

Don Miguel rang for the servant to show him out.

"Don't think this is the end of the matter," Nick ground the words out.

Outside, Paco and the mule dozed in the welcome shade, but Pack, his senses finely tuned to the least sound, opened an eye to see Nick walk wearily and none too steadily from the door of the villa—alone.

He gave Nick a hand up and flicked the mule to set it in motion. "So, my friend, the little senorita stays, heh?"

"Not for much longer." Nick gave him the gist of what had transpired, his voice betraying him more than he guessed. "Look, you'd better take me to the ship. Then get back as quickly as you can and tell Juan what's happened. I must see him as soon as possible... in that coppice just beyond the Vasquez villa."

"You should take a rest, Senor Nick," Paco advised him dourly, without much hope of being heeded. "Already you have driven yourself beyond your strength."

Mr. Fletcher said much the same thing

upon seeing him. "How can I rest?" Nick flung the words at him savagely. "I tell you, Bob, there was something downright frightening about that girl's composure! As though she was on the edge of hell with no means of retreat! I simply have to get her away from that house before morning."

"Well, you can't do anything until this brigand fellow turns up," said Bob Fletcher reasonably. "So why not snatch a couple of hours sleep meanwhile?"

Nick, unable any longer to ignore the nagging pain in his side, acknowledged the sense in Bob's reasoning and succumbed to his unutterable weariness, having first extracted a promise that he would be awakened the moment El Terremoto sent word.

Nick came out of a heavy sleep filled with dreams of searching endlessly for Consuelo, with Don Miguel blocking his path at every turn. He sat up abruptly, aware instantly from the sun's angle that he had slept far too long. Nick called for Mr. Fletcher, who came running almost at once.

"Bob, you crass, misguided dunder-head! Why didn't you wake me before now? Don't you realize that I've lost precious hours? And where the devil is Juan? Paco should have been back with him long before now!"

"If you will only calm down for a moment..." Bob Fletcher began wryly, and stopped as a carriage came clattering along the quay. A lackey sprang down to open the door and let down the steps for Don Miguel Alphonso de Aranches to descend.

Nick watched grimly as the party came aboard, his greeting terse as he bade the don state his business, then get off his ship.

Fury leaped into the Spaniard's eyes, but it was quickly controlled. "My

business, Captain, concerns my wife, who disappeared from her bedchamber some time this afternoon when she was supposed to be resting."

Surprise, uncertainty, followed by the swift joy of knowing that Consuelo was free, though he knew not how, flooded through Nick in quick succession. He was hard pressed to keep his feelings from showing as he said, "Really? How very sensible of her."

"She did not accomplish her departure unaided." The light voice was beginning to take on its shrill note. "Several of my servants were rendered senseless and tied up in a particularly vicious way!"

Nick was beginning to understand. "So? Why do you come to me?"

"*Caramba!* Do you take me for a fool?"

"What I take you for is hardly pertinent at this moment," Nick drawled provocatively and had the satisfaction of making Don Miguel go crimson with anger.

"Can you deny that my wife is on this ship?" he squeaked.

"I have not laid eyes on Consuelo since this morning."

The Spaniard was tenacious to the last. "Then you can have no possible objection to my men making a search of your ship, lest she might perhaps have slipped aboard unseen?" he said with heavy sarcasm.

But Nick was suddenly tired of playing verbal games. He had far more pressing matters on his mind. So: "Oh, but I do object," he said softly.

At the last, spite overruled prudence. "You are welcome to her!" Don Miguel spat the words out. "Nevertheless, she is still my wife..."

"In name only," Nick cut in, hoping to God that he was right.

"That you will have to prove." Triumph made him careless. "She could

always live as a *puta*—in view of her recent exploits, the role should become her well!"

Nick's fist smashed into the smug face and the don sprawled senseless across the deck. The two lackeys moved menacingly forward and then thought better of taking on the whole crew.

"Get him off my ship," Nick said. "But before you go, Don Miguel, hear this. Consuelo will obtain her annulment without any trouble whatever." He paused to let the information sink in before saying coldly, "That is all. Good-bye, Don Miguel."

He stood impassively until the party was ashore and driving away from the quay. Then, without looking around and with the tautness in his voice betraying an unbearable anxiety: "So... where exactly have you got Consuelo stowed?"

"She is in my cabin," Mr. Fletcher replied."

Consuelo sprang to her feet, scattering cards everywhere. She stood, her eyes questioning as they devoured his face. Then he opened his arms, and as if released by a spring, she rushed forward to be received in a crushing embrace. And promptly burst into tears.

Consuelo's arms were clasped tightly about Nick's neck as though he would never let him go. "I am being very silly, I know," she sobbed joyfully through her tears. "But I had thought that I would never see you again! Everything has been so truly awful!"

"Truly awful," he agreed with feeling. She settled blissfully into his shoulder and told him all that had happened. "I had

written a message for El Terremoto which Maria was to have delivered to him, but it was not necessary, for he had followed you down from the mountains and was already waiting to rescue me! Wasn't that clever of him?" Her enthusiasm bubbled over. "His men knocked out Don Miguel's guards and then one of them climbed up to my window and helped us to tie the sheets together so that we could climb down! It was the greatest adventure!"

Nick laughed, overjoyed to have her restored to herself once more. His heart melted with love for her. He claimed her lips once more, meeting with so passionate a response that time ceased to have any meaning. Only very gradually did he become aware that the ship was moving beneath them.

He stirred and murmured against her ear, "Shall we go up on deck, my dear love, and bid farewell to Spain?"

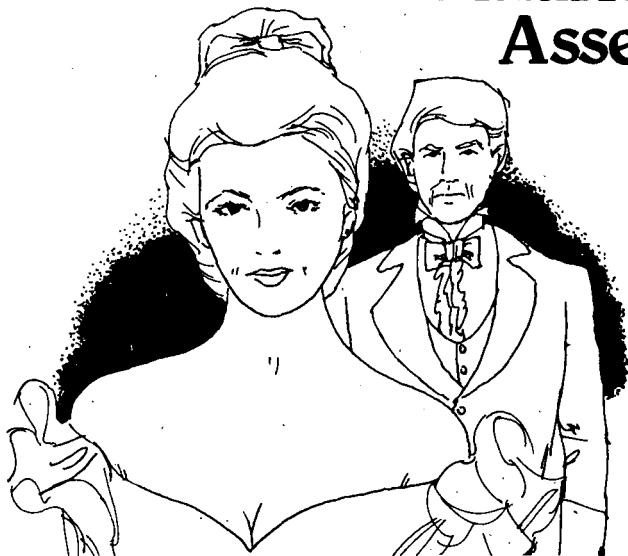
Later, Consuelo leaned against the rain with Nick's arm safely about her, and felt a small pang as the shoreline receded.

"Oh, see!" she cried, pointing eagerly toward the path leading to the mountains where several figures were clearly visible. As they watched, the leader, perched incongruously astride a mule with his long legs dangling, lifted an arm in salute. They waved back.

"I have just thought, *amigo*," said Consuelo, raising her head from his shoulder to smile provocatively up at him through her lashes. "I suppose one might say that we are eloping. And this time there will be no 'wicked captain' to prevent us." ♥



A Marriageable Asset



Vanessa's father saw her as an asset to be auctioned off to the highest bidder—but she was determined not to give herself even to the man she loved unless she could entice him to love her in return.

By RUTH GERBER

Sir Lucius had two passions: gambling, and his young second wife, Miranda. Between them, they kept him constantly on the verge of bankruptcy. For Miranda's sake—because she did not want to be encumbered by a stepchild—when he married he sent his young daughter Vanessa to France to attend a convent school. Her cousin Jeanne (married to a Frenchman, the Comte de St. Varres, and living in Paris) was asked to supervise the child's upbringing. This arrangement satisfactorily completed, Sir Lucius promptly forgot his daughter and scarcely thought of her again until he received a

most unexpected but welcome offer: the Earl of Melcourt wished to marry Vanessa and was prepared to pay well for the privilege.

In his desire to mend his usual impoverished state Sir Lucius did not inquire too closely into the offer; but even if he had, it would not have struck him as strange. Obviously this was no love match, since to his knowledge the Earl and Vanessa had never met. But their families were already united by marriage—Vanessa's brother Andrew was wed to the Earl's sister Gwyneth—there was impeccable breeding on both sides, and Vanessa had a consider-

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able fortune in her own right. Her grandfather had left her—tied up tightly in a trust so Sir Lucius could not touch it—his estate, Shelburne Park, plus a substantial yearly income. It appeared that the Earl of Melcourt, having sown the wild oats of young bachelorhood, now wanted to settle down with a woman of his own class to produce an heir.

There was, however, one problem. With England and France now at war, the channel between the two countries had become a battleground and routine commerce was almost nonexistent. Fortunately, one of Sir Lucius' servants, Abel, had been a seaman and still had some acquaintance with the captains who managed to slip back and forth across the channel, carrying contraband goods from one country to the other. Abel had arranged to have Vanessa—disguised as a boy, for her greater safety—smuggled back to England in the hold of one of these ships. She was now staying at an inn till he could escort her home.

Sometime during the night, Vanessa Charldon stirred, uncomfortable now in the chill that had invaded the room in the Rose and Carter. Still somewhat befuddled, she arose and managed to stagger toward the fireplace. In the quiet of the room an insistent murmur of indistinct voices was impossible to ignore. They seemed to come from the chimney itself. Believing her imagination to be playing tricks on her hearing, Vanessa was about to stir up the fire when she realized that the conversation had something to do with her. Not every word was distinguishable, but there were two voices: one deep, the other curiously nondescript.

"There have been reports of lights on the beach and in the Park as well as within Shelburne Hall. Therefore, you had better proceed with caution. It would never do

for the Earl of Melcourt to be found engaged in a matter of questionable legality."

Caught up in the discovery of the identity of the deeper-voiced speaker, Vanessa lost part of his response.

"...by my mother, Lady Presteign. I have discovered that the Charldon girl is due back in England, and if I must marry her to obtain the property, marry her I will."

The Charldon girl! That was she! No one was going to marry her for the sake of Shelburne Park if she had anything to say about it.

The scraping of chairs seemed to signal the completion of their conference.

While an exhausted Vanessa returned to bed and to sleep, the Earl of Melcourt sat before his fire damning his obligation to William Pitt.

He might very well be put into a precarious matrimonial position if he was obliged to offer for the girl for the sake of an empty house and a deserted stretch of beach. But Shelburne's sheltered cove and secret tunnels afforded safety to the men who risked their lives for the information needed by His Majesty's government in its fight with the French. He had promised Pitt what had seemed little enough at the time—to gain possession of the Shelburne property—but he had no idea that he would have to do more than purchase it.

Perhaps his mother would know of some way to approach Sir Lucius Charldon to gain his consent to at least rent the property. The older man was constantly in the hands of the moneylenders and could certainly use the money—unless he was holding out for a marriage settlement.

All thoughts of solving Mr. Pitt's dilemma were put aside as his lordship perused the contents of a letter handed to him by his butler.

"Damn!" he muttered beneath his breath. "Has she no sense?" He crushed the engraved paper in a convulsive grip and flung it from him.

"Did your lordship mean to burn this letter?" Parker asked as he picked up the paper.

"I suppose it's necessary. When Lady Charldon first began to send me these letters, we thought it would be a good idea if Pitt used the same letter paper."

"It was an excellent idea, my lord," said Parker. "The Charldon cipher is as well known in the neighborhood as your lordship's. Thus the messages from Pitt are considered to be merely love notes."

The Earl stretched out his long legs toward the fire. "I would burn all Lady Miranda Charldon's letters without opening them, but how then could I tell them from Pitt's?"

He frowned thoughtfully, regarding the blaze upon the hearth. "And since in all likelihood I will marry Lady Charldon's stepdaughter, Vanessa, my correspondence could create complications."

The fact that people talked about Lady Charldon meeting him at Shelburne had worked to his advantage, but now he had no intention of encouraging her. Miranda was becoming tiresome in her demands and entirely too possessive. She was also much too free with her tongue in front of friends and servants alike. The relationship was becoming tedious.

Having slept the clock around, Vanessa descended to the stables of the Rose and Garter. She found a nag suitable for her requirements, and declining the offer of a stableboy to accompany her, but helping herself surreptitiously to a lantern, Vanessa set out determined to investigate what the years had done to Shelburne Park.

As she rode she could almost hear her

grandfather's voice. "Have your brother beat four times over and then some. No spunk, that Andrew. That's why I'm leaving Shelburne to you and tied up so neatly that that father of yours can't get his hands on it. When he's twenty-five, Andrew will come into the money I put aside for your mother. A pretty penny, that, if he's not a fool. It's you, girl, that I have to protect."

Her grandfather was long since dead now, but in his study the smell of books, leather, and polished wood was just as it had been. The room felt as if someone had merely stepped out for a few minutes.

The afternoon sun sent a shaft of light through the mullioned windows and across the library table. The prismatic effect of light breaking up into its diverse colors suddenly caught Vanessa's eye. Surely, if the crystal decanter and partially filled glass on the library table were any indication, whoever had been interrupted would soon return.

Undoubtedly it would be wiser to postpone her visit than to satisfy her curiosity, she thought as she opened the library door the merest crack, but she was rarely wise, as Vanessa would have been the first to admit. She simply hoped that the library's previous occupant was too far away to cause her any concern.

"You can't mean to offer for her?"

A woman's low, sultry voice reached her ears, and Vanessa realized that the speaker was no more than a yard from the door.

"I don't know. . . . Well, I suppose I do. I'd put up with almost anything to get Shelburne Park into my hands."

"You must have a friend—someone who could marry her and then sell the property to you, Melcourt."

He laughed. "Is she so bad then, your little stepdaughter?"

Her father's wife! What was she doing

here with the Earl of Melcourt? And talking about her! Vanessa stood frozen to the spot.

"Don't tease me," the indelicate creature pleaded. "You know how I feel about . . . us. Lucius is a very sick man," the voice almost purred. "His doctor assured me . . ."

"Don't bury your husband before he is dead, my dear Miranda; it is in very bad taste. Besides," he said sardonically, "he may fool you, after all."

"But, Sylvester, I thought that you and I—"

"No, Miranda," he interrupted firmly.

"Don't tell me you plan to set up your nursery?" she jeered.

"That, madam, is something a man discusses with his wife, not his future mother-in-law."

The unseen object of the Earl's matrimonial plans thought he was taking entirely too much for granted and opened the door a hairsbreadth more to see this paragon.

Without hesitation she struck out at her pursuer, the weight of the heavy lantern behind the blow.

From her vantage point in the library, Vanessa Charldon watched the Earl escort her stepmother through the doors of the Great Hall. There was no telling how long Miranda would keep him busy. With no way to go but up, and still clutching the borrowed lantern, she made a wild dash for the stairs. She had almost reached the top before she realized that the pounding in her ears came entirely from her heart and not from her noble suitor.

Risking a glance over her shoulder, she saw him enter the Hall. A final burst of speed and Vanessa flew into a room near the top of the stairs, praying that he had not seen her but fearing that she had not altogether escaped his notice.

Her breath was loud in her ears as she struggled to open a window and then concealed herself behind the holland-covered portieres. The Earl, just as she had hoped, ran to the open window upon entering the room. Without hesitation she struck out at him, the full weight of the heavy lantern behind the blow. He fell with a thud, stretching his full length on the floor.

She placed the lantern on the floor beside him as she leaned over him. Her hands were quite steady, she was pleased to note, as she checked his heart. He would be blessed with a thundering headache—which he richly deserved, thought Vanessa with satisfaction as she drew the door shut behind her and descended the stairs. Invite his women to her house, would he!

Dashing tears of anger from her eyes with the back of her hand, she swore all manner of revenge on the man who was planning to make her his bride. She struggled with the doors leading from the Great Hall as if attacking them; the desire to kick, scratch, and bite anything barring her way was overwhelming. How she wished she had that—that—coxcomb—in front of her. She'd soon sharpen her claws on him. Demure little convent miss was she! Did these people think that nothing had happened in France, then? And as for his noble lordship, he would condescend to marry her even though he might find her repulsive! How she would make him suffer! The doors slammed behind her, echoing the violence of her thoughts.

As she ran to where she had tethered her horse, she did not notice that the slim

gold chain that had supported her most prized possession—a locket containing pictures of her cousin Jeanne and Jeanne's husband Raoul—was no longer about her neck.

"I'm no asset to be married off to the highest bidder," Vanessa told her brother Andrew as she paced from one end of the library to the other.

"I don't say you are, Vanessa. Do you think I pay any heed to Father?"

Quite thoughtfully, she compared this shabby room with the library at Shelburne Park. Her lip curled in contempt. No wonder her father needed money. It only remained to find out exactly why the Earl was interested in her.

"You are advising me to marry the Earl, are you not?"

"For your own sake," he responded, ignoring her skeptical look as he sprawled on the sofa. "Sylvester is young, wealthy, and of good family. What more can you want?"

"What does he want from me?"

"He's my best friend—and my wife Gwentyth's brother."

"When I saw her at dinner last night, she made it very obvious she had no use for me."

"She did tell me you were unattractive beyond belief.... And you are. You can't have changed that much—even after eight years. At breakfast your face was lumpy on one side, now it's the other, and that monstrous wig you're wearing keeps slipping." He looked her dumpy figure up and down. "I know you're deliberately making yourself look ugly to discourage Sylvester."

"So you guessed. Well, not a word to your friend Melcourt. For the time being. I would keep my secrets."

Vanessa had no way of knowing that

the events which were to alter the course of her life had their start a few months ago, when Lady Presteign attended a dinner given by Prime Minister William Pitt's niece, Lady Hester Stanhope. Since Pitt seldom appeared at social functions these troubled days, Lady Presteign had been pleasantly surprised to find herself seated beside him. A longtime acquaintance of her ladyship, the Prime Minister had not hesitated to share his concern over the vulnerability of the Channel coast.

Very gently, Pitt then turned the conversation to Shelburne Park. He professed great interest in that area of Dorset—in Shelburne in particular—and frankly admitted that it was of prime importance to the country to have the use of it—but in secret.

Feeling flattered that he reposed such confidence in her powers of discretion, Lady Presteign suggested that her son was the very person the Prime Minister should approach for information.

"Perhaps Melcourt could do even more than obtain information for you," she told Pitt. "There is a chance, a slim chance that he could secure the property."

Her ladyship realized that she had been manipulated by a schemer even more devious than she was.

Not until the dinner had long been a memory in most minds did Lady Presteign wonder if perhaps her meeting with Pitt had been engineered by the master statesman. He had very likely known that Vanessa Chardon was not only her god-daughter but also the owner of Shelburne

Park. It was a case of the manipulator being manipulated, she thought with a grimace. She did not like feeling that she had been outwitted, but she felt she could put up with it if it would accomplish her purpose.

Now, months later, she waited for her son to return from an interview with Sir Lucius, and for one more stitch to be taken in the tapestry which would release her goddaughter Vanessa from the toils of her father and, perhaps, gain a wife for her demanding son.

"Did he agree to sell Shelburne Park?" she prompted her son when he walked in the door.

"No. It seems that the property does not belong to him but is held in trust, with a further inheritance of sixty thousand pounds, for his daughter."

"Well, then, I suppose you shall have to rent the property, although it would not serve Mr. Pitt's purpose half so well," she mused.

He gave a short laugh that was patently not indicative of amusement. "Mr. Pitt won't have to compromise, Mother, since Sir Lucius tells me it is impossible, under the terms of the will, for anyone to rent the Shelburne property."

"It seems a strange will. Did he explain it to you—or just say no?"

"He explained it to me clearly, and I felt he took a perverse delight in doing so. The estate remains in trust for his daughter until she marries. At that time it becomes the possession of her husband, who cannot sell it unless there is no issue within ten years of the marriage."

He stood, walked to the fireplace, then returned and looked down at his mother.

"The will cannot be set aside, Sir Lucius assures me," he told her dryly. "He attempted that some years ago when he found himself in straitened circumstances. He also made it clear that if I

wanted the property badly enough, he would be pleased to welcome me as his son-in-law. Then he had the effrontery to say that you would be pleased, as you and his first wife had intended this."

"That was too bad of him." Lady Presteign frowned. "I hope you didn't insult him."

"No one could insult Sir Lucius when the smell of money is in the air."

"Yes," she admitted. "Vanessa's mother and I were friends. We came out the same year and often visited back and forth, even after we married. Sir Lucius had not yet dissipated his fortune, you see, and even you will have to admit that the Charlton lineage is impeccable. He's a different man since his first wife died."

"I don't see what this has to do with—"

"Wait! When your sister Gwenyth was born, we planned that someday she and Andrew would marry. Later, when Vanessa was born, we made similar plans for the two of you, including a formal betrothal. The first Lady Charlton died the year after Vanessa was born, and although I was—am—the child's godmother, Lucius and I mutually agreed not to continue the connection. He had not been very friendly before your father died, and after I married, I wanted none of his toadeating."

"Yet, Gwenyth and Andrew met because I brought him home from school with me on the long vacations."

"So they did, my son. They fell in love and decided to marry, without any assistance from me. I did not mention their childhood betrothal until quite recently."

The Earl smiled wryly. "You always encouraged me to have Andrew come home with me."

"Yes, I know, I'm sorry I was never able to do something for his sister, but she

was such a baby. . . . The one time I tried, I was put in my place."

She told her son of the reception she had received from Sir Lucius on the occasion of her visit on behalf of her god-daughter.

"I was not able to see her before she was sent away. I lost track of her then, I'm sorry to say, and your inheriting the title so unexpectedly drove everything out of my mind at the time."

"Sir Lucius may have thought he was rid of her, for until I told him I was interested in Shelburne Park he was not happy about her imminent return to England, necessitated by the dangerous political situation in France. I believe he did everything he could to speed her return after that."

"Vanessa should have left France years ago. For that matter, she should have remained in England. But, Sylvester, now that she is returning, isn't there something that can be done to help the poor child?"

"Now, Mother." He raised his hand in protest. "You know me better than to think I would marry a little schoolgirl because we were betrothed when she was in the cradle."

"Of course you need not marry the child, Sylvester. There must be some way we could get Lucius to allow her to come on a visit." She looked at her son, her blue eyes crinkled at the corners. "There is a way," she said speculatively.

"Go on," he told her, laughing. "I am sure you have planned admirably."

"Well, yes, I believe I have. Call on Sir Lucius; let him know that you're not unwilling to meet the terms of the will if you and Miss Charldon will suit. Naturally after you've met her, I too must see her, and I'll be unable to leave London at that time. Lucius will be forced to send her to me for a prolonged visit. Once Vanessa is with me, I doubt that her father will push

too hard for her return. As her godmother I shall present her at Court and, like as not, she will make a good match before the year is out. She is a Charldon, after all, and a considerable heiress, if one remembers that will."

The girl whose picture was in the locket was beautiful—quite unlike plain, dumpy, shy and awkward Vanessa.

Her bright eyes twinkled. "Sylvester! If Lucius thinks there is a chance you might offer for Vanessa, no doubt he will permit you to investigate things at Shelburne. No one will be surprised if you take an interest in an estate that might someday be yours, for you're known in the district as a careful landlord. You could redeem your promise to Pitt."

He stood suddenly, frowning. "It might work at that," he told her.

The Earl of Melcourt, preparing to dispatch a note to Sir Lucius, indicating the time of his call, caught sight of the locket he had found under his hand after his encounter with the mysterious visitor at Shelburne Hall. Frowning, he opened it and once more studied the two faces portrayed within. The girl was beautiful and, his mother had said, very much like the first Lady Charldon, who had been an acclaimed beauty. This must be a picture of the daughter, Vanessa, though it certainly did not look like her as she was now.

With the morrow's visit to Charldon Manor he intended to entice a very special guest into his net. My lord looked once more at the jeweled ornament. Yes, he was positive that the person who had lost

it would do a great deal to ensure its return.

The tall young man bowed before the young woman who, very *jeune fille* in chaste white muslin, swept him an equally ceremonious curtsy. In answer to her barely mumbled, "Pray, my lord, be seated," he selected a chair that enabled him to observe her at a respectful distance.

She lowered her eyes to the hearth, and my lord watched her with seeming indifference. If not for his mother's assurance that the miniature was undoubtedly a portrait of Miss Charldon, since it looked so like her mother, he would never have believed it to be the same girl as this fallow, dumpy creature. Whatever she had done to herself, it was not going to put him off.

Not usually first to initiate a conversation, the Earl, out of sheer mischief, ventured an opener designed to lure Miss Charldon into betraying herself.

"I have been given to understand that you have been in France for over eight years."

"Yes, my lord," she responded woodenly.

"You were in a convent, I believe."

She looked down at her clasped hands. "My . . . Father . . . wished it."

His eyes gleamed at her evasive answer. She was no fool, then; her masquerade had a purpose. Perhaps this would not prove to be so boring, after all.

The silence grated on their ears, but neither Miss Charldon nor the Earl attempted to assay any further conversation, until Andrew cleared his throat in a loud and significant manner.

"Perhaps my sister would care to walk in the gallery; it's rather stifling in here."

"Oh, no, I am quite cold." She managed a convincing shiver.

"May I get your shawl?"

She declined his offer most politely, but the Earl was determined to get her off by herself to pursue a question paramount in his mind. Although she resisted his maneuvering, the other member of the party, realized his superfluity—and remembering his father's instructions—excused himself from their presence.

My Lord Melcourt was in no hurry to break the uncomfortable silence. When he did speak, it was not of politics or of the sudden warmth of the weather, but of a most unusual object which had chanced to fall into his possession.

Miss Charldon, her interest piqued, was moved to express her pleasure in seeing such an article as my lord described and was barely able to conceal her disappointment at his failure to have brought with him such an elegant piece of workmanship. With her permission he would dispatch a servant to ask his man to remove it from the mantel in his room where it had reposed since coming into his possession.

Vanessa was relieved of the need to sustain further conversation by the entrance of the Earl's sister and Lady Miranda Charldon, harmoniously allied, for the first time, in the cause of preventing a match between the brother of the one and the stepdaughter of the other.

The Earl made his way up the stairs to prepare for his expected visitor. Vanessa knew where he kept the locket; he had told her himself at the same time that he had informed her he would be at Fitzwilliam's for dinner. He did not think she would ignore such a tempting invitation.

Seeing a mysterious visitor glide into the room, Melcourt said, "Good evening, What luck I chanced to be at home to receive you."

The figure stumbled, recovered, her

Vanessa drew down the hood of her cloak to hide her face, but it was no use—she had already been seen.

full cloak swirling about her, and then, without turning around, made a mad dash for the door. Not appearing to move with undue haste, the Earl reached the door first and, with a graceful bow, cut off her exit.

“Surely you’re not planning to leave so soon? You’ve just arrived. I insist that you accept my hospitality.”

He walked toward her, extending his hand. “I’m being a neglectful host; let me take your cloak.”

Vanessa held it more tightly about her and pulled the hood close, hiding her face.

“If you wish to continue with the farce, it is all one to me,” the Earl drawled. “However, I’m sure you’ll discover it quite impossible to eat dinner while your hands are engaged in trying to conceal your identity—although it is most unnecessary, my dear Miss Charldon.”

“I shouldn’t be here, my lord,” she trilled, forcing playfulness into her voice.

“I’m aware of that. How came you then, to be here?” Melcourt asked, wondering what manner of story Miss Charldon would contrive.

“I was very curious about the ornament you described. You needn’t be harsh with me, my lord,” she sniveled. “You can imagine I was shocked speechless at seeing you.”

“I’m sure you were,” he agreed sympathetically. “Since I am here, however, I’d like to take advantage of your presence. I realize this is not the place for a proposal of marriage; nevertheless I am making one.”

“I am very sensible of the honor you do me, my lord, but we would not suit. I would not fit in your circle. I am very meek, and shy, and I know I have no style at all.” Vanessa jumped to her feet, punctuated her little speech with a curtsy, and sat down as hastily as she had risen.

The Earl excused himself on some flimsy pretext. He took her hand and placed a kiss on the upturned palm.

“Ten minutes,” he said, and departed.

The sound of the door closing behind the Earl wrenched Vanessa’s quivering nerves into immediate action. Flying to the window, she thrust it open, looked out, and then, satisfied, slid out on the narrow ledge, her face to the rough stone.

From a vantage point in the library, the Earl was able to keep his eyes upon the open doorway. Expecting Vanessa to charge down the stairs at any moment, he quickly removed a large pendant from a skillfully concealed wall safe, and strode purposefully up the stairs, wondering if she would cry and plead, or if she would try to gull him, or if she would tell him the truth. He frowned. He could be wrong. Perhaps she was no more than she seemed to be: a foolish, giggling, empty-headed chit. He did not think so, and when he opened the door on an apparently empty room, he knew he was right.

Seeing the open window, he recalled the last time he had chased after Miss Charldon. He was on to her, the little vixen, and he’d be damned if he would give her another crack at him.

The room was too quiet, almost eerily so, Melcourt decided, watching for some telltale movement of the draperies. Warily, he stepped to the window and moved the portieres to the side. Finding nothing, he forced himself to look at the ground, dreading what he might find. There was no sign of her. Momentarily, the Earl was confounded. Then it hit him. The little

devil! There was only one other way he knew to leave the room and that could have proved disastrous. Perhaps it was just as well she had made good her escape. If he had found her, he might have been obliged to put an end to her game, although he had been tempted, just for a moment, to take advantage of the situation.

Meanwhile he was deriving a great deal of amusement from the unpredictable, unconventional, and decidedly captivating little minx.

As though walking in her sleep, Vanessa drifted from her father's sitting room, the door closing silently behind her. The interview had been painful. Pleas, threats, and recriminations had left her father unmoved. His last words echoed in her ears: "You will accept the Earl's suit, Daughter, for I'll not change my mind. If you prove exceptionably obstinate, I will engage to find another husband for you . . . General Dalrymple—or perhaps Lord Gresham . . . who won't care if you say yes or no."

Vanessa knew she had no choice, yet she hated herself for her cowardice. How could she bear the thought of General Dalrymple, who had been old when she was a child—or worse, Lord Gresham, who had slobbered all over her hand on the night of her seventeenth birthday, when Raoul and Jeanne had taken her to the Paris Opera. Vanessa shuddered, remembering the other times she had seen him and how he always made her flesh crawl.

She must not think of that now, she told herself. She had promised to see the Earl and would reserve her final answer until then. If he was his usual hateful, sneering self, she might still find the courage to refuse him. But last night he had not sneered. Last night, if she had

waited for him, he would not have been hateful. The locket had been only an excuse, she realized, an excuse to see him, be near him.

The Earl was startled by the depth of despair he could see in her lovely blue-violet eyes.

It was strange; she hardly knew him, yet . . . She should not have been afraid of what he might do. There must be worse things in the world, after all. At least she would have been wanted and safe in his arms, if only for a while. To belong to him, body and soul . . . no, she must not think that way, for that only led to weakness and she must be strong: strong enough to resist the urge to accept Melcourt as a husband no matter what his reason for proposing. She would have to fight her own feelings. She could not let herself be sold—bartered as if she were some inanimate thing, incapable of emotion. Sometimes it seemed as if she could not fight any longer. How exhausted she was. Like a bird futilely beating its wings against the bars of a cage, she was trapped.

"Miss Charldon, will you take a turn in the garden with me?" the Earl asked kindly.

He was startled by the depth of despair in the tear filled blue-violet eyes she turned to him. Not waiting for her to answer, he took her unresisting, cold hand in his big warm one and led her from the chill, somber drawing room, through the doors, and into the warmth of the sun-drenched garden. The sudden brightness forced Vanessa to blink, sending a tear

coursing, unnoticed down her cheek.

She was unconscious of his scrutiny as they walked beneath lofty, newly leafed branches to a stone bench at the base of an ancient oak. Sitting at Vanessa's side, still holding her icy hand, the Earl felt a strange stirring in his heart. What a lovely thing she must be, if the miniature was true to life. He would like to see what she looked like without the disfiguring padding his experienced eyes discerned. The thought was suddenly exciting.

"Miss Charlton . . . Vanessa . . . Your father has given me leave to address you."

"Yes, my lord?"

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

The forlorn little creature before him betrayed her agitation by wringing her hands.

"But you can't wish to marry someone who doesn't wish to marry you."

She was desperate, was she? He might have known she would be compelled to accept his suit. If he withdrew it now, life would be made even more unbearable for her. Her grief demanded an outlet, yet he knew her pride would not permit her to break down before him. A good, strong, healthy anger was preferable to the sick despondency mirrored in her eyes.

"It is quite refreshing to find someone, who professes disdain. I hate women to fawn over me."

"You are insufferable!" She sprang up as though finding his proximity distasteful. "I warn you, my lord, I shall be a most unwilling bride."

He surveyed her through his quizzing glass. "That will be most stimulating to my jaded appetites, my dear. I shall press for an immediate ceremony before your sentiments change, as I'm sure they will."

"Never!"

He had flung a challenge, and she had accepted. Her extraordinary eyes flashed

bolts of lightning at him that even her ridiculous eyeglasses could not disguise.

Seeming not to care that he was driving her into a fury, he drew her toward him. "Shall I make you melt in my arms, little icicle? I can, you know."

For a moment her knees felt weak. Was this how he made them feel, the women who craved his love? How dare he treat her like one of them? She swung at him in sudden anger, but he caught her fist in his open palm.

"Your swing is too wide, and you've left yourself defenseless. I shall teach you better when we are wed," he told her with a laugh.

"I'll do my best to make you miserable," she warned as she wrenched herself from his grasp and ran toward the house.

The Earl of Melcourt, happy that Miss Charlton seemed to be in better spirits, followed at a more leisurely pace, enjoying the unseasonable warmth of the day. He was not in the least perturbed that his proposal had been accepted in so irregular a fashion.

True to her word, Lady Presteign invited Vanessa to pay her a long visit. Further, she convinced her godchild to leave off the wig, the glasses and the padding she had been wearing to make herself unattractive in Melcourt's eyes. Since he had proposed to her in spite of them, even Vanessa had to admit that wearing them was pointless. So tonight she had gone to the theater looking her natural, very beautiful self, and the Earl seemed fascinated when he caught a glimpse of her. But she managed to evade him and hasten back to Lady Presteign's house. Once there she instructed the maid, Iris, to tell anyone who came inquiring for her that she had retired and could not be disturbed.

However, this did not discourage the Earl when he arrived, soon after. "Iris," he said to the flustered maid, "tell Miss Charlton that if she is not here in two minutes, I shall come in and get her."

Vanessa had thrown off her clothes and had been about to slip into bed when her maid returned with the Earl's ultimatum. Ignoring Iris's frantic screech, she stormed into the Jade Room, prepared to do battle.

"How dare you!" she exploded.

Melcourt verified the time, replaced his watch, and allowed his eyes to travel from curling pink toes to tousled red curls. "Apparently my message worked," he drawled, blandly ignoring her anger. "I said two minutes. It is well under that, and here you are—although"—he raised one quizzical brow—"I did not expect you in such *deshabile*."

Anger gone, she flushed, suddenly aware of the revealing picture she presented in her thin lawn nightdress. She wanted to cover herself with her hands, but her pride would not allow it. She would have retreated then, but his hand reached out to stop her.

Melcourt stepped past her through the doorway. "Bring a robe for your mistress, Iris, and something for her feet."

The girl bolted from the room, and soon returned with a robe.

"My apologies," said Melcourt smoothly. "I thought you were hoaxing me. I did not realize you had retired."

Vanessa looked over her shoulder as he held the robe for her, an imp of mischief in her eyes. "I had not retired," she chuckled. "I thought you might not be above coming into my room to check."

"It did occur to me," he grinned, suddenly not tired anymore, "but this was much more—rewarding."

"You mean revealing."

"That too." His eyes were on her full

young breasts.

"Wretched creature. At least, if we marry, you shall know what it is you are getting."

The Earl had to admire her quick recovery but was not above another gibe. "Not 'if.' Do you think there is any doubt in my mind after seeing you tonight?"

"Good night, my lord."

"Don't freeze up on me. I did not mean to embarrass you any further, child. It is just that you are so damned beautiful..." He held out his hand. "Don't go, please. Won't you share my supper? I shall be on my best behavior."

"The servants... I'm sure Iris went running to the butler, Benson."

"A rubber or two of piquet? That should convince him everything is in order."

With a tremulous smile Vanessa allowed the Earl to lead her to the cardtable.

"I require a wager to make me play this game in earnest," the Earl said. "What if I say 'a kiss'?"

"The last game was yours, I believe," Vanessa remarked after they had played awhile and an awkward silence had fallen.

Melcourt realized how ill at ease she was at his obvious admiration. It was hard for him to drag his eyes from her. As she took time over her discard, she felt him looking at her and rebuked him for not attending to the game.

"I am justly admonished, child. I require a wager to make me play in earnest."

"Name it, then, Melcourt."

"You first, Vanessa."

"A ride behind your grays—with the reins in my hands," came her answer with scarcely a pause.

"Now your stakes, if you will."

"And if I say 'a kiss'?"

"And if you do?"

Her blue-violet eyes sparkled in enjoyment as she fenced with him. There was an answering flame as his eyes swept over her.

"A kiss then it is, Vanessa," he said deliberately.

The game, played now in earnest, fell to the Earl on all counts. "Will you pay your losses now," he asked, "or shall we settle at a future date?"

She looked at him shyly, surprised that he had left her a graceful way out. "I will pay now, if you please." It was the veriest whisper.

"Wicked, wicked children!" accused Lady Presteign as she opened the door. "How could you leave me to attend that dreadful Serena Bellingham's after-theater party alone when I would have longed to spend a quiet evening with my family?" Her voice faltered as she entered the room. But she went on bravely, "Vanessa, child, you were quite wise. If you did not have the headache before, you would have it now—as I have—and I am going straight to my bed. Good night, children; do not stay up too long."

Lady Presteign kissed each of them, ignoring Vanessa's guilty look, and left the room as suddenly as she had entered it.

"Good night, Vanessa."

"Good night?" She was startled.

"Sleep well, child. You will be ready tomorrow afternoon? I do not like to keep my horses waiting."

"Your horses, my lord?" she echoed dazedly.

"You did say you wished to handle the reins did you not?" he asked with con-

siderable amusement.

"But you won, my lord."

He took her unresisting hands in his. "Let us say, rather, that we are both winners." He raised her hands to his lips and kissed first one and then the other.

Long after he had departed, Vanessa lay in bed wondering if all gamblers had the same burning desire to pay their debts as she had. Somehow she doubted it.

A letter arrived with Vanessa's morning chocolate. Ignoring the cup, she instead devoured the letter, only to scowl and throw it onto the tray, obstinately refusing to reveal any distress. She was more perturbed at the overwhelming depth of her disappointment than at Melcourt's cancellation of their drive. Common sense told her that some important business must have come up, causing him to change his plans. It was too bad that that same common sense could not raise her spirits.

During the course of the next few weeks, Vanessa, to her intense relief (as she frequently assured herself), saw little of the Earl. At the musicales, balls, and card parties that they both attended, he was invariably giving his support to the Prince of Wales; on the occasions he called at Mount Street, she was busy with her Edgerton cousins.

But in his mind the Earl rehearsed all the things he wished he could tell Vanessa, beginning with that night in the Jade Room. He had promised that she could drive his grays, but on returning to his house in Berkeley Square, a message from the Prime Minister had awaited him. In the morning he had sent a hasty note to her, canceling their drive. Later that day, as a tacit apology and a token of his esteem, he had chosen an exquisite gold and sapphire spray of flowers at Rundell and Bridge, the jewelers. He had been on

the point of leaving when an inner door had opened and out had come Miranda Charldon. Having arrived by hackney coach, she had asked to be driven home. She had hung upon his arm, and as he had helped her into his curricle, Vanessa and her cousins had driven past. He could well imagine the interpretation Vanessa had put on it . . . and this time he was innocent.

Damn Miranda! Damn Pitt and the French! "I have no illusions about the Grand Alliance, my lord," Pitt had explained on that morning several weeks ago. "We are in grave danger of losing our remaining allies to the French. Information is what we need. I must know the names of the officials who are being bribed by the French and how much it will cost to buy them back. If we do not succeed in this, we may very well find ourselves standing alone against all of Europe."

His voice was insinuating, as was his manner, but Vanessa forced herself to endure his loathsome touch.

"And what can I do to help, sir?" Melcourt had asked, almost dreading an answer.

"Many of my agents have disappeared. . . . This time I want you to arrange for my—friends—to be delivered to ships of the Channel fleet—at night, and in secret."

Perhaps it was just as well that Vanessa had seen him with Miranda. At least she would not be looking for him in the next week or so; he must be free to disappear at will.

Vanessa left the ballroom and walked

out onto the deserted balcony. She did not realize that she was no longer alone until she heard a slight cough. She turned toward the shadowy figure and was enraged at herself for feeling a sharp pang of disappointment.

"Good evening, Miss Charldon. I pray I am not intruding."

"Not at all, Lord Gresham. I merely felt in need of a breath of air," replied Vanessa, polite despite her unease.

"It is a sad crush, is it not?"

She did not feel his question required an answer and turned to go, but he caught her hand and fondled it. "What is your hurry, my dear?" His voice was insinuating, as was his manner, but she forced herself to endure his loathsome touch. She had never been alone with him and did not quite know what to expect, but he was received everywhere. Perhaps this feeling of revulsion was unwarranted and unjust.

"I bear a message from your father," he said "He has stipulated that he wants you to marry, and he gave me permission to address myself to you, provided your affections were not already engaged."

Her voice was as coolly impersonal as she could possibly make it, although he set her teeth on edge. "My engagement to the Earl of Melcourt is to be announced tonight."

She pulled away from the portly libertine and almost ran into the noisy ballroom.

There was Melcourt, with Miranda on his arm. No doubt he was taking her in to supper. Vanessa did not hesitate an instant. Hastening her steps, she caught up with them before they could leave the room.

"Ah, there you are, Sylvester! I am sure Miranda will excuse you." She gave Miranda a slight proprietary smile and then ignored her as she drew the Earl to

one side. "Do you think our engagement should be announced tonight? It was necessary for me to inform Lord Gresham just a moment ago."

He noticed the bright splash of color on her cheeks and the rapid beat of the pulse at the base of her throat. Melcourt's eyes searched for and found Lord Gresham standing at the balcony window, and his eyes narrowed just a fraction before he bowed and kissed Vanessa's trembling hand.

Then he went over and bent to his mother's ear. Lady Presteign's smile deepened as she embraced him and then held out her arms to Vanessa.

"I am so very happy for you. May I share this wonderful news with our friends?" asked Lady Presteign. "And when is the wedding to be?"

"In three weeks," Melcourt said. "There will be no guests, just family."

"Three weeks," Vanessa repeated dazedly. "Three weeks—that is too soon."

"Three weeks," he said once more, firmly dismissing her objections.

The three weeks passed all too quickly and finally Vanessa was alone with her husband. She leaned forward as the Earl poured bubbling wine into his glass. Then she asked, "Was Shelburne Park really worth marrying me for?"

"Would you believe me if I said you are more important to me than Shelburne Park?"

Her shrug was so eloquent of distrust that he winced.

"No?" Melcourt quickly recovered his composure. "Then apparently there is nothing I can say to convince you." He set down his glass. "I know you wish to retire; I will escort you to your room."

The household settled and the typical after-dark noises came and went, but the

door between the bedrooms of the Earl and his Countess remained closed. Cold comfort, indeed, to Vanessa, who had been prepared to deny her husband his rights until his superior strength compelled her surrender. And now, to have him leave like that, without even trying to make love to her! She wept into her pillow and fell asleep with the bitter taste of tears upon her lips.

Upon leaving Vanessa, the Earl had congratulated himself on his self-control while deploring its necessity. If he had spent many more minutes with his wife, he would have made passionate love to her, something he did not dare do as yet. He would have to move slowly and carefully if he was to make her love him. He could not convince her that he loved her—not now, when Shelburne was to be kept Pitt's secret. It was damnable what one sometimes had to do for one's country.

Matters were still in this awkward state when, two weeks later, Vanessa sought out her husband. "My dear stepmother came to call and, finding you away from home, requested that I put into your hands a very important letter. She insisted that it was too personal to be left on your desk or in the hands of a servant."

The Earl took the white square in his hands and deliberately, methodically tore it to pieces. "I want you to know that I have never... cared... for Miranda," he said.

A shy, flickering smile rewarded him. "You are very kind."

"Kind? I?" He was strangely touched.

"My father and... Miranda... made me feel inconsequential. I cannot fight all the time. I have been happier here than I could have been with them."

"Then I am happy too."

Vanessa knew he was sincere. She pull-

ed herself together with a certain bravado. "Can we be friends?"

"Friends," he conceded and extended his open palm to her. After a moment's hesitation she placed her hand in his, and his warm strong fingers closed about hers for uncounted seconds. Melcourt bowed, placed a light kiss on her hand, then released her.

Once the door had closed behind the Earl, Vanessa threw herself on the bed, anguished, despairing, smothering her sob in a pillow. She would never show him by word or deed that she wanted to be more than a casual companion—unless he pursued her.

In the depths of her bed, Vanessa stretched languorously as her maid opened the draperies on a beautiful spring morning.

Vanessa stared at the Earl's door for several minutes before summoning the courage to knock.

What a wonderful week this had been! The long rides, the solitary picnics and dinners she and Sylvester had shared, had led her to depend on him as she had never depended on anyone. She loved him; she knew now that she must have loved him for a long time. And he loved her too—she was almost sure of it. Tonight, yes, perhaps tonight, he would take her in his arms and kiss her for the first time. She would offer herself not with words—one could not say right out, "I want you to make love to me."

Tonight she would order dinner served in her sitting room, and she would wear a robe of the softest, sheerest silk im-

aginable. She had never worn it except in the privacy of her bedroom because its caressing sapphire folds clung to her, giving more than just a promise of the lithe form beneath. She would make herself as desirable as any painted courtesan.

More blue than violet tonight, Vanessa's eyes seemed the color of the clinging gown she wore. She presented a totally seductive image, of which she remained unconscious even as she gazed into the tall pier glass. All she thought was that she looked so obviously young... and unfledged.

By the morning, she assured herself, all that would be different. Would spending just one night with a man be enough to dispel that untouched look or would it take several nights? Something happened between a man and a woman to account for the difference.... She was not completely ignorant, but, after all, humans could not be equated with animals.

Acutely aware of voices in the adjoining room, she could imagine Melcourt changing for dinner and talking to his man as he did so. The sound of the door closing behind her maid was echoed further down the corridor, and Vanessa knew that the Earl was alone even as she was. She stared at the door for several minutes before summoning the courage to knock and then almost wished she had waited, for the door opened suddenly, as if he had been standing very close to it. He looked so big, so overwhelming, as he smiled down at her. He held something in his hand that he tossed onto the little table adjacent to the doorway separating their rooms.

Resting his hands lightly on her silk-clad shoulders, he looked down into her eyes with a burning intensity that released her from the speechlessness that had claimed her as she had stood at the door.

"Do you think you would like to dine

up here tonight, Sylvester? I...we...it will not be necessary to dress for dinner..." She blushed at her own temerity, but her eyes met his bravely as she waited for him to show his approval.

Her invitation went through the Earl like a shock. She was almost in his embrace, and she was promising more! Damn his obligations! Groaning inwardly, he told her with apparently unruffled composure, "Vanessa, dear, I should like it above all things, but I cannot possibly, not tonight. I am dining away from home."

Melcourt felt her stiffen under his hands and glide away from him with a slight movement of her body. As he looked into her eyes, he knew that she had withdrawn completely. Almost ready to explain, he recalled in time that the secret was not his to divulge.

"Please forgive me," she intoned in a small, wooden voice. "I am not usually this stupid. I do not know what has come over me. I must be very tired."

"No, Vanessa! My dear, I am the one who must ask forgiveness. I have an... engagement... I must keep."

"Yes, of course. I understand." She gave him a brilliant smile, then swiftly turned so he would not see that she was blinded by tears.

"Good night," came Melcourt's voice softly, regretfully.

She could not answer. Someone had placed a metal band about her chest and it was so tight she ached for want of breath; her throat felt raw with unshed tears. Stupid! Stupid! He never thought of her at all; it was all a take-in... a trick! It was Miranda—always Miranda. It was her letter paper he had been holding when she interrupted him. She would have recognized it anywhere.

She would show him! If gaiety and brilliance were what he wanted, he would

see she had them. She would fight Miranda with her own weapons—and win! It would not be difficult to arouse Melcourt's jealousy. She could picture it: other men gathered around her in admiration. She had done with being humble. Let him be the one to beg. Then she would laugh. "Oh, how I will laugh," she said aloud, and with the back of her hand wiped away the tears.

The Earl returned to London on the twenty-fifth of June. He had driven himself hard in the three weeks since Vanessa had left him at Melcourt—for his country's sake and also to return to her as swiftly as possible. Now, having been informed that her ladyship was out, he sat waiting, his eyes turning time and again to the clock on the mantel. Its hands were almost on the dinner hour when Vanessa entered the room.

She wanted to shrink from the savagery of his embrace but there was no escaping the tumult of her feelings.

He raised her hand to his lips in silent homage as his eyes feasted on her loveliness. Never had he seen her like this—sparkling as the diamonds that swung from her ears, scintillating as those resting on her bosom. Never had he seen her in a gown that showed her to such advantage—and so much of her. Its deep blue color accented the whiteness of her skin, the soft flesh that swelled at the low-cut bodice.

There was studied indifference in Vanessa's expression as she asked, "Are you dining from home tonight?"

"I thought we would spend this night by ourselves. We have been married for over a month and, as yet"—his arm stole about her and he lowered his voice until it was a caress—"as yet I have not made love to you."

The Earl bent his head until his lips almost touched Vanessa's hair. His remark had been intended to cast her into blushing confusion, but no sooner had he uttered it than he knew that for once he had been mistaken about a woman's feelings.

On her part, Vanessa was angry with herself at the depth of emotion he was able to inspire in her. She turned slightly and let his arm fall from about her shoulders. "I have an engagement tonight."

"One you cannot break?"

"One I have no intention of breaking."

The disappointment he felt did not register in his face or voice: he was coldly sarcastic.

"And who is this paragon you cannot bear to disappoint?"

Melcourt did not wait for an answer. Intoxicated by her beauty, blinded by desire as well as anger, he crushed her to him and lowered his head to drink dry the honey of her mouth. Vanessa fought him with all her strength, but opposition only inflamed his senses; resistance made him cruel. She was a mad, unsatisfied craving in his blood.

Vanessa wanted to shrink from the savagery of his embrace, but there was no way to escape the maelstrom that whirled her around and around. Deep within her something stirred, and she gave herself up to the warmth of his demanding mouth.

She did not know when he released her, just that he had opened the door and was looking at a letter handed to him by one of the servants. The paper was well known to her, and probably better known to him, she thought. Just then the butler entered to say that Lady Charldon had arrived

and was desirous of speaking with his lordship.

Vanessa thought the Earl's surprise well done: a mere flicker of the eyes, a slight raising of his left eyebrow. His eyes sought hers, but she would not meet them.

"Well, my lady?"

"I am sure that you and my stepmother have a great deal to discuss. If you will excuse me?"

As she left, she knew that he would have had the servants say he was from home if she had asked. But she would not humble herself to him. If he wanted Miranda, let him have her, but *she* would never share him with anyone. He would have to do without a wife until he made up his mind.

As she swept angrily through the hall the butler approached, bearing a note. To her joy and astonishment, it was a message from her cousin's husband, the Comte de St. Varres. He was in England and he needed to see her, urgently. Remembering all he had once risked to help her escape from France, it did not occur to her to question or to refuse. She could be ready in an hour, as he had asked. No one needed her. The servants ran everything with only token assistance from her. Her presence was unnecessary to the smooth operation of the household, she told herself as she climbed into the carriage that had been sent to get her.

A semblance of a smile lighted Vanessa's face for an instant as she noticed the basket. Tucked into the folds of a snowy white napkin, Vanessa found Raoul's apology for his untimely haste: a fresh loaf of bread and a bottle of white wine that was pleasantly cool to the touch.

She poured a glass of wine; she was thirsty.

Sleepless nights at Melcourt Castle had taken their toll, and Vanessa curled up in

the corner and closed her eyes. She was tired; she could hardly keep her head up. She felt peculiar—dizzy. Maybe she should get the coachman to stop. Vanessa willed herself to raise her hand, but it did not obey her. Her eyes closed, and her head lolled back against the cushions in a drugged sleep.

When she woke, a man stood before her, a candle in his hand. At first she did not recognize him, and then she realized that it was Lord Gresham, a rather terrifying Lord Gresham with a gloating smile upon his face. As though conferring a signal honor upon her, he told her why he had abducted her and explained some of the doubtful pleasures in store for her at his knowing hands.

The metallic taste of fear was in her mouth, as she listened to him. She was barely able to squeeze out one word from a throat gone suddenly parched. It began as a scream in her mind, but it came out a croak.

"Melcourt? Your husband's mistress will engage his interest, my dear Countess—Vanessa. So you need not worry that he will look for you. You and I will beat them at their own game, my dear."

Vanessa heard Gresham snarl orders to a servant and then stamp out of the room, slamming the door behind him. She allowed herself to open her eyes to the gap-toothed smile on the face of an old harpy.

She permitted the woman to help her tidy her hair and straighten her creased and crumpled white muslin dress, more to bolster her own sagging courage than out of any desire to mollify her abductor. As the old harpy ushered her into the shabby sitting room, Vanessa faced Lord Gresham with bravado, insisting upon her release.

"Do you think my husband will let you get away with this?"

"By the time you return to the castle, he shall be convinced that you have been seeing your lover. I have it on good advice that he will not believe you."

Vanessa was stricken. Miranda! How her stepmother must hate her to do this terrible thing to her. As for Melcourt—the less she thought about him, the better.

***He handed her his coat, saying,
"Your gown is even more
revealing than the latest Paris
fashions."***

Lord Gresham threw her onto the sofa, and fell upon her, covering her face with slobbering kisses. "After tonight you'll know who your master is."

His hand hooked at the neckline of her dress and ripped it to her waist. Eyes bulging at the sight of pink-tipped breasts cupped in the torn garments, Gresham subjected her to as many abuses and indignities as he could while trying to control her with one arm.

"Fight me, you little beauty, fight me. There'll not be an inch of your body I won't cover with bruises and kisses," he panted as he lowered his head.

She raised her knee with an abrupt movement, and he collapsed, moaning, at her feet.

"So you learned something from me, after all."

Startled Vanessa turned and saw at the open window the tall, elegant figure of the Comte de St. Varres.

"Oh, Raoul," she sobbed as she ran to the shelter of his arms. "Thank God!" But there was little time for tears. "He is a spy, Raoul! While we were fighting he

told me so. He boasted about his powerful friends in France and threatened to take me there."

"We suspected that some of his activities were illegal but we were not sure. The authorities will question him now."

Gresham was still moaning as Raoul ripped the neckcloth from his prostrate body and trussed him the way he might have a small bullock. He then removed his own coat and helped Vanessa into it. "This gown is even more revealing than the latest Paris fashions, so we will button the coat. But then, Jeanne will be able to tell you all about the fripperies our ladies are almost wearing," he continued.

Vanessa blushed and clutched the lapels of the coat tightly to her. "Jeanne? Then she is already here? But then you did not need me after all."

"Exactly," he grunted, bending down to check his prisoner's bonds. "My thanks to your husband for her safe arrival. Abel was coming to tell you we were here already, when he saw you enter the carriage. He recognized Gresham's coachman and followed. He did not think you would go with Gresham willingly."

As Vanessa looked at him in astonishment, he rose to his feet and led her through the garden window to where two horses were held by a groom.

"You might as well know that we have been watching Gresham for some time—thanks once again to the very astute gentleman you married. He distrusted Gresham from the first."

Raoul exchanged a few words with the groom and then helped her to mount. "You will be all right with the lad, Vanessa. I have told him to go slowly. When you tell Melcourt what has happened, give him my thanks. It may be some time before I can get back. It all depends on what we learn from Gresham."

Although they kept country hours, the

household could not have been long abed, an exhausted Vanessa decided as she bade her young guide a grateful farewell and entered the darkened castle.

She disrobed in her bedroom, and as she approached the bed, a solitary candle cast alternate day and night on her long, slender limbs. Somehow she sensed the Earl's presence and stood poised to flee.

There was something about the way he was looking at her that made her wish her nightdress was not so revealing. She wanted to turn from him, but fear had left her paralyzed. Not until Melcourt rose from the chair did she wrench herself into sudden movement, but it was too late for escape. Slowly and inexorably he drew her to him until the whole length of her quivering young body was against him.

"Have you been with your lover?"

She wanted to confide in him, be comforted by him, but now, at his words, she remembered Gresham's warning: "I have it on good advice that he will not believe you." Vanessa clenched her teeth and struggled against arms that tightened about her in a cruel embrace.

"What?" he said softly. "No story springs readily to your treacherous lips to explain your absence these many hours? Perhaps you would care to try my kiss, madam wife, to compare?"

"Never. . . You will never lower me to that level," she hissed, angered beyond all reason.

It was the wrong thing to say, but she was past caring. He bent his head to her upturned face and pressed his lips to her fiercely and angrily, until she shrank from the savagery of his embrace. He let her go suddenly, and she swayed blindly, her hands outstretched. With a hollow laugh that had no humor, he scooped her up in his arms and placed her on the bed. His hands lingered possessively even as he withdrew them from her bruised and

shuddering body. His voice matched the bleak expression on his face.

"You make a man want you—but you are not worth it. And that's the hell of it, my dear. You are not worth it. . . . At least Miranda. . . ."

He turned abruptly and started for the door. Vanessa leaped from the bed and snatched up the first thing at hand, sending it flying across the room to smash against the door.

"You pompous, arrogant beast. If I were a man I would run you through."

The Earl turned casually. "Since you are not, you shall have to rely upon some other fool to defend your honor." His voice told her he thought there was precious little to defend. "Perhaps Monsieur Andre Vallier would be your *cavaliere servente*," he told her with repressed savagery. With two swift strides he was at her side, grasping her arms roughly. "In the future you should tell him to be more gentle with you. You bruise easily."

Vanessa stared at him, startled, and he misinterpreted her expression.

"No need to look so surprised. I have seen marks like these on a woman's breasts before. I only wonder, with such a beginning, that you did not stay the night with him."

In a dreary voice she said, "Miranda did her work well."

"All that Miranda told me. . . is it the truth?"

"The truth? What is the truth?" she answered him tauntingly, heedless of the pressure his cruel fingers were beginning to exert. "The truth that I spent many days and nights with Andre Vallier? The truth that Andre Vallier and I were closer than two people could possibly be? That my bed was indeed that of Andre Vallier? Yes, and yes, and again, yes."

She had goaded him past all endurance, but she did not care. She almost wished he

would put an end to her agony—permanently. He held her in a merciless grip. A mist obscured her vision and a rushing, a roaring filled her ears as the blood pounded agonizingly in her head. Her eyes sought his, accusing, imploring, reproaching. Then her vision dimmed, and she knew no more.

When she returned to consciousness she decided that she would go back to Charlton Manor. With what she knew about Miranda, her stepmother would not dare refuse her. After a time she would go away. She would need money to set up her own *menage*. Later, when she had time to lick her wounds and the hurt disappeared, then she would think about it—not now.

"A gentleman to see you, my lord," the butler announced. "He says he can give you word about Andre Vallier."

An uncertain summer sun was doing its best to overcome a lowering sky as the Earl came to terms with a late breakfast.

"A gentleman to see you, my lord. He said he has news of Andre Vallier."

Parker, the butler, had entered in his usual silent manor.

The Earl unfolded his tall body from the dining chair and left the room.

"You wished to see me?"

The man at the window turned, and a cold mask slid over the Earl's features as he recognized the Comte de St. Varres.

"Monsieur Vallier, I believe?"

Smiling, the Comte said, "I am here to tell you of the relationship between Vanessa and the one you call Andre Vallier."

"Yes?" Melcourt's voice was curt.

"In a word, there is none. Regardless of what you have been told by someone wishing to make trouble, Andre Vallier does not exist. That is the name Vanessa used in her escape from France. Naturally she knows 'him' intimately and has shared 'his' bed."

"So that is how it is." Suddenly the Earl's eyes lighted up in a smile that made him seem very young and carefree. "The little vixen! She was punishing me!" Becoming more serious, he added, "Then it is you we have to thank for unmasking Gresham as a French spy."

"And you to thank for seeing to the safety of my wife and small son." The Comte continued, "As for the unmasking of Gresham, it was only confirming your suspicions, my lord. But it was not I who was responsible for the actual trapping of the spy. It was Vanessa." He recounted the tale of Vanessa's abduction. "So you see, my lord, you were very effectively taken out of the way."

The Earl exclaimed, "My God! What she must have suffered at the hands of that swine! I saw her that night—after she returned. I lost my temper in a fit of jealousy. . . . You are sure she is—unharmd?" His voice was hoarse, the words torn from his throat.

"Your wife, my lord, is a remarkably apt pupil with pistol, sword, and, in this case," he smiled, "a knee to the groin. Unfortunately," he added, "Vanessa is of the opinion that you have no need of her. Even as I am talking to you, her clothes are being packed and she is trying to talk her maid into going to Italy with her. I must tell you, my lord, that what she plans, she invariably executes without delay."

The Earl was patently startled, and Raoul pressed home his advantage. "Once she is out of England, it will be only with the greatest difficulty that you get her

back."

"And your suggestion?"

"Vanessa rides to Shelburne Park every afternoon. She leaves Charlton Manor at two o'clock or thereabouts."

"And no one will worry if she does not return from her ride?"

Raoul smiled. "I think not. Not now."

"Good! I think we understand each other completely," said the Earl as he accompanied his guest to the door.

Melcourt, ever the man to prefer action to the spoken word, quickly made his preparations and chafed at the enforced delay. Well before time, he was booted, spurred, mounted, and riding toward Shelburne Park. Stationing himself in a small copse that overlooked the road, the Earl maintained a steady vigil.

Vanessa didn't notice the other rider until she was abreast of his hiding place. She tried to evade him, but not even her superb horsemanship could keep her safe from him. She risked a glance from the corner of her eye, heard him give a short laugh as he suddenly shot ahead, and then she was torn from her horse and imprisoned within the circle of his arms. She silently endured the ride to the Castle, refusing to give him the satisfaction of asking his intentions.

She tried to draw herself away from any contact with him, but it was impossible to escape from the arm that encircled her like a coiled spring as they proceeded at a walking pace. Sooner than she could have wished, Melcourt Castle was in view and she knew that no matter what she did, what she said, she was at her husband's mercy.

The Earl did not relinquish his precious burden as he slipped from the saddle. "Have Titan seen to, Parker," he told the unruffled butler as he stalked through the doorway.

"Your rooms have been kept in readiness," he mentioned casually as he entered her bedchamber, but the beating of his heart was anything but that, she knew. He placed her on her feet and withdrew his hands suddenly, causing her to stumble and to lean against his unresponsive chest for a fleeting second before she drew back.

For a moment, looking at the shadows beneath her eyes, he was tempted to tell her that he knew the truth; that revelation would earn her friendship, but he wanted more than that. He tried to harden himself by thinking of the anguish he had suffered by thinking her unfaithful.

"If you can't understand why I'm crying," Vanessa snapped, "I'm certainly not going to tell you."

Then he sallied forth to review his arrangements for dinner. On his return he found her bedroom in shadow and quickly lighted the branch of candles on the dressing table.

"I have not run away, if that is what you are thinking."

He followed her voice to the massive four-poster in the center of the room and drew a quilt up to her chin. "Stay there until the room is warmer," he said as he bent over her. He moved to light the fire.

The fire well begun, the Earl strolled back to the bed and proceeded to tuck the covers about her once again. "What is this?" He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over, detaching her fingers from the quilt she had drawn up to hide her face. "You are not crying?"

She turned, no longer avoiding his

searching eyes, and answered him baldly, "Yes."

"Whatever for?"

"If you do not know, I am certainly not going to tell you," she snapped with a return of her old antagonism as she sat up and pulled the quilt about her knees.

He took her chin in his hand, not letting her draw back, turning her face this way and that. Then he bent swiftly to place a kiss on her lips and left her before she could so much as sputter.

Her eyes followed him as he crossed the room. She heard water trickle into the basin and quickly closed her eyes. He resumed his pace beside her and placed a wet cloth over her face.

"Water is running down my neck! Sylvester! You idiot! Do something or I shall be soaked to the skin!"

He realized with a start that under the wet cloth she was laughing. The tension within him was released as though a spring had been touched, and his own laughter rang out free and clear. He removed the offending cloth and patted her wet face with a towel. And then, without warning, he began to unbutton her riding-dress.

Laughter that had its origin in pure relief now stuck in her throat. "What do you think you are doing? Stop it this instant!"

"I am unbuttoning your habit, can you not tell, my dear?" mocked the Earl. "It will not do to have you soaked to your skin, and such pretty skin too." He placed a soft, lingering kiss in the lovely hollow at the base of her throat.

"Now take off the rest of your clothes."

Vanessa looked at him as though he was demented. He did not ask her again, but began the job himself, heedless of her protests. His hands and his eyes registered the silky softness of her white body, and his mind stored the information for the future. Paramount in the Earl's mind was preventing further suffering from the

violent chill that had suddenly taken possession of her body.

Vanessa was no longer protesting as Melcourt helped her into the tub. She was merely grateful for the all-enveloping warmth that stopped the convulsive movement of her body.

With as much ease and apparent unconcern as if he had done it for years, he began to soap her back. He was only amusing himself, Vanessa knew, but she could not help responding. She allowed herself the luxury of a small, contented sighs and relaxed under his ministrations.

"As a back scrubber you are superb," she told him with mock seriousness.

"Shall I show you how well I can do the front?" He stepped around to face her, and she hastily crossed her hands over her breasts. "Oh, no!" he said with a laugh. "You are my wife, even if you have not given much thought to it! Is it not time to consummate our bargain?"

Vanessa flinched at his choice of words, but realized her only hope was to sway him from his anger. He held out a huge towel for her. Apparently she was expected to get out of the tub in front of him. She shut her mouth on angry words. After all, he was her husband, and he had just seen her enter the tub, and she not wearing a stitch.

Making up her mind, she said, "Will you pretend with me? Pretend you have just married an innocent young girl who trusts and loves you? Would you not then teach her of love and would you not find more satisfaction in this, rather than in forcing her to your will?"

He wrapped her in the towel as she stepped from the bath. "Does this add spice to the game you play with your lovers?" he asked casually, but she could see the corded muscles of his powerful arms suddenly tense.

For a few seconds she did not know

what to say, then she decided that only the truth would answer. "I know you will not believe me, but I have never known a lover."

There was a strange expression on his face.

"I said you would not believe me, my lord." There was no bitterness, only sadness in her voice.

He bowed. "So you did, my lady."

She winced at the coldness of his voice, not realizing the enormous strain he was under to control himself—to keep himself from possessing her at that very minute. She looked up at her husband, her eyes wistful.

"Once it would have been 'my love.'"

Melcourt turned on her so wrathfully that Vanessa blanched and took an involuntary step backward. His eyes blazed with savage ferocity.

"It would be so easy... so easy to use your beautiful white body..."

She sat down on the bed, suddenly weak from the shock of his words. "Why do you torment me so?" she cried.

"I? Torment *you*? My God, when I think of the sleepless nights, imagining you in someone else's arms! It does not bear thinking of!"

"And what of your doxy?"

"Miranda and I have not been lovers for some time. She is too soiled even for me, my sweet."

"But the notes from her... You always went to her when she sent for you!"

"The notes? Ah, yes! They were on Miranda's letter paper, were they not? A good ruse, Mr. Pitt thought at the time—especially if I seemed to take up pursuit of Miranda once again. The letters went from Pitt to me, on her paper—and it was on my crested paper that they went the other way 'round. Even Miranda's unexpected visit to Shelburne served only to confirm the suspicions of the local

gossips that I was a rake with nothing more pressing on my mind than my neighbor's wife.

"I was certain that Gresham had traveled between France and England on more than one occasion. But all I could do was put Abel to watching him whenever Gresham was in the neighborhood. Pitt couldn't take action without proof, because of Gresham's friends in Parliament.

"Something was going on—something dangerous to the crown, but what it was we did not know precisely until Gresham fell into our hands. His final coup for France was to have been the abduction of His Majesty while he was sea-bathing in Weymouth—a masterstroke if it had succeeded. If Gresham had not involved himself with you at the last, King George would be in France now."

That was important, to be sure, and at a later time, no doubt, Vanessa would consider her part in it. Right now all she could think was that Sylvester and Miranda were not lovers. She must have said this out loud, for he answered her.

"I have taken no woman since I met you—and I think it past time to remedy that."

Hugging the towel to her body with one hand, she appraised him, but his face gave her no clue to his feelings. Vanessa's breathing was harsh, as if it pained her, and her words seemed torn from her throat. "Have it as you will. I shall not resist you, but if you can find it in your heart to be gentle with me, I will give you kiss for kiss, caress for caress; I will do anything you wish."

"You have made me a very generous offer, one I would be mad indeed to refuse. I intend to take you up on it. In fact, the more I think on it, the more appealing it becomes. Perhaps by this time next week I myself shall believe that you

are my young, innocent bride."

"Next week? But..."

"Enough!" His anger scorched her. "I will keep you a week, a month, a year... However long I choose."

"There can be no future for us that way."

"Is that dress being worn for the first time, or have you tested the efficacy of it on your other lovers?"

Melcourt ignored her frantic words. "And now I shall leave you to dress for dinner. If you wish for my help, knock on the door."

Once again he was cold, and she was totally confused. Vanessa could not decide which she preferred: his icy restraint, or his passionate but loveless embraces. He bowed formally and left the room, without touching her in any way. To Vanessa this signified his utter contempt—perhaps even disinterest—and suddenly she was furiously angry—angry because just looking at him made her knees weak. His touch was capable of turning her insides to water, while he seemed to be unaffected by any emotion save anger.

Her own fury turned to determination, and she turned to her wardrobe and reached for the most daring and seductive ensemble she had ever worn: an overdress of heavy reembroided lace buttoned high under her breasts to frame a diaphanous silk nightdress, which revealed every contour of her body; the skirt, slit high up the sides, showed tantalizing glimpses of hip and thigh through a thin layer of white silk gauze. It was a deliberately provocative bit of drapery and she

knew how successful it was when she entered the sitting room and found the Earl awaiting her.

"If your intent was to entice me, you have achieved your aim." He walked around her, holding his quizzing glass to his eye, "Is this being worn for the first time, or have you tested its efficacy on your other lovers?"

"Sylvester! You promised!"

"Promised? I did not promise, I merely agreed that your proposal might be worthy of a trial. But I will promise now. I promise that before the night is over, you will know that love is not a game for children; you will know what it means to be loved by a man."

He led her to the table and seated her with exquisite courtesy, leaving a kiss upon her nape, where the curls were still damp from the bath, and causing her to shiver delightedly.

Vanessa admired the beautifully set table as the Earl poured champagne into sparkling crystal glasses. He leaned over to refill her glass, whispering, "No hands but mine will serve you, no eyes but mine will see you this night."

With succeeding courses, she knew not what she ate, but only that she herself was being devoured at his leisure. It set her teeth on edge, and she began to ache with an emptiness he alone could fill... but not this way. This way led only to despair.

Vanessa got up from the table with a swiftness that took him by surprise. "Do you mean it? All the words, the kisses? If not, it is no good." She walked to the window and stared out, seeing nothing. "Is this how one begins an *affaire*, meaning one thing; having one purpose in view, fooling each other with pretty speeches, kisses.... You see, I would not know. I have never taken a lover," Vanessa took a deep, ragged breath. "I am in love with you, and you are making a mockery of

everything I believe in. Let me go, Sylvester. Please!"

"Too late, Vanessa. I cannot let you go now. I can never let you go. Your sweetness, your courage, everything about you..."

Her voice trembled. "But you cannot love me, you only pretend for a little while." The next words came in a whisper. "As you are pretending now."

"Is there any need for me to pretend, now that you have admitted your love?"

Even as he scooped her up in his arms. Vanessa was torn with doubt. "You will keep me then? You will not send me away?"

"Send you away?" he laughed joyously. "I told you I shall never let you go."

"But I do not understand..."

"Little fool," he told her lovingly, "I thought I should never get you to admit your love—and I was so afraid you would not believe anything I said that I did not dare tell you how I felt."

"As I was afraid to admit it, in case you should use it against me," she confessed.

"Two foolish people, Vanessa. I have loved you since the night you came to me at Melcourt Castle."

His lordship's bride whispered something in his ear which must have been extremely satisfactory.

"So long ago as that?" he murmured against her ear as his arms tightened possessively about her. "If I had known, you would be my wife in more than name."

His Countess looked up at him with sparkling eyes. A dimple appeared in her cheek as she said, "Then it is quite your fault, my lord, and entirely up to you to do something to remedy it."

The Earl, never one to shirk responsibility, accepted all blame and carried her to her room, prepared to correct his error to his lady's satisfaction. ♥

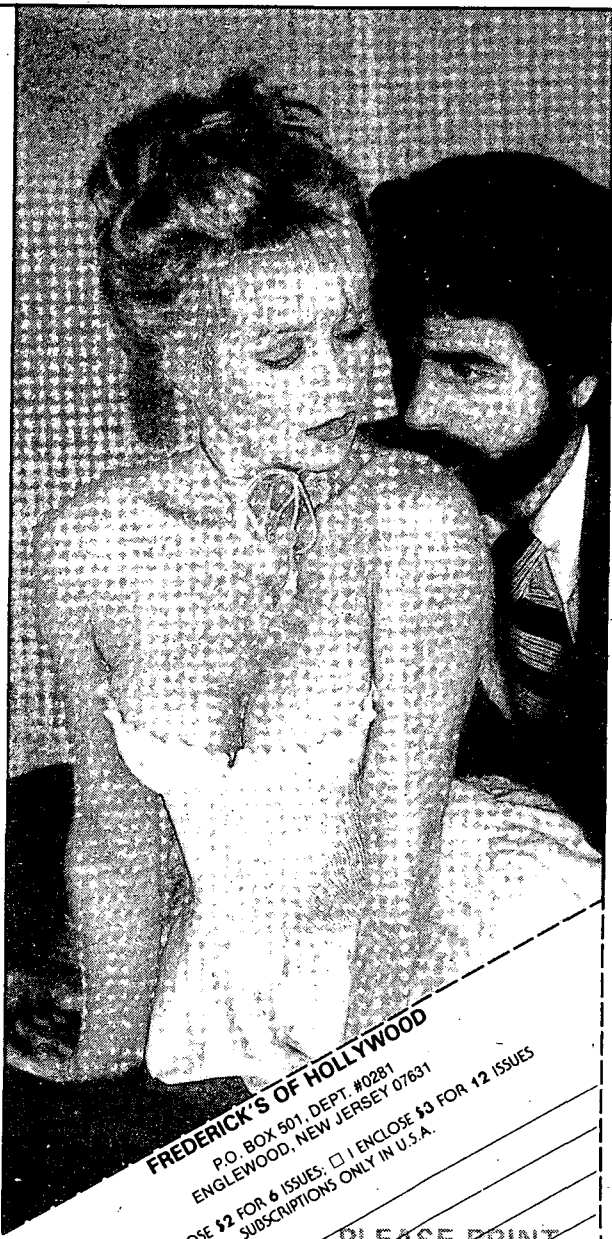
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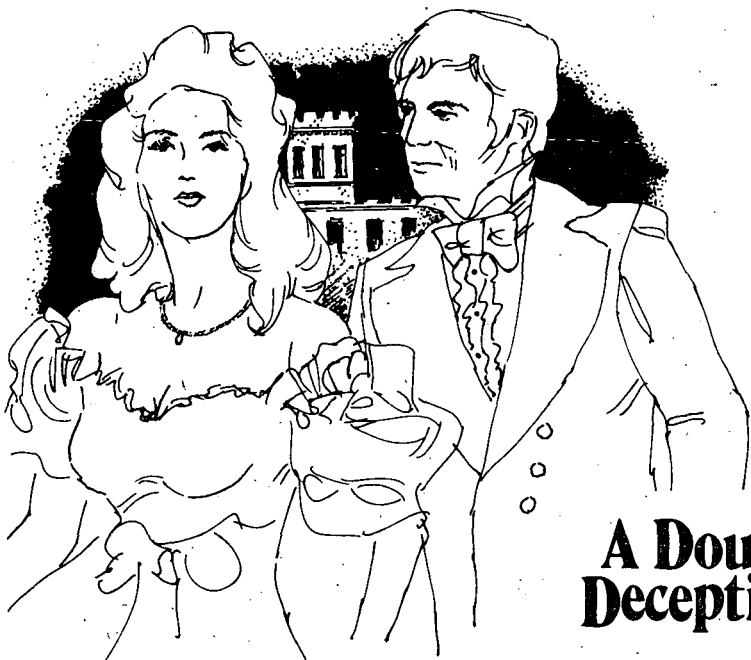
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A Double Deception

A ravishing young widow, betrayed as a wife by her husband's dark secret, Laura reluctantly marries the handsome and brilliant Earl of Dartmouth, himself the survivor of a tragic first marriage. Then Laura discovers how much she can love a man—and, to her distress, just how much she can fear him, as well.

By JOAN WOLF

In the autumn of 1814 Lady Maria Cheney attended the wedding of her nephew, Commander the Hon. Mark Anthony Peter George Cheney. It was an affair of much pomp and circumstance, as befitted the alliance of two of the oldest and most influential families in the county. The history of the Cheneys stretched far back into the days of the early Plantagenets, and the present Earl of Dartmouth, Mark's father, had been for forty years the

most important man in Devon. The bride was Caroline Gregory, and the Gregory family, while not so illustrious or wealthy as the Cheneys, was quite old.

The present heir to the earldom moved now from the sacristy to the front of St. Peter's Church, the parish church for Dartmouth Castle, to await his bride. Mark wore his naval uniform, and Lady Maria wiped away a surreptitious tear at the sight of his composed young face. She

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did not entirely approve of a boy of twenty assuming the responsibilities of marriage, but she was aware of the pressing need for him to do so.

Standing next to her, her brother, the Earl of Dartmouth, looked older than his sixty years. The death of his other son, Mark's older brother, Robert, had aged him badly. Lady Maria reflected on that tragic event of just under a year ago. It had been such a freakish accident! Robert was a very good boxer. The blow to the head he had sustained had not seemed so serious at first. And then two days later he was dead.

Robert's death had changed Mark's life more than anyone else's. As a second son, he had chosen the traditional Cheney profession of the navy. Not for Mark the landowner's education of Eton and Oxford. He had gone to sea as a child, been a midshipman at eleven, a lieutenant at seventeen, and at nineteen he had been posted to the rank of commander.

Lady Maria, who had taken Mark's mother's place after her death when Mark was seven, was much afraid that Mark's naval days were ended. Mark's job in the future, she reflected, was to run the affairs of his family, his property, his county, and his country. Ever since Mark had arrived home six months ago, he had heard little else from his father but one refrain: marry and get sons. The Dartmouth line, unbroken in six hundred years, must not be allowed to die.

Mark, however, had not needed much urging to marry Caroline Gregory. One look at her delicate beauty, her big blue eyes and shining golden curls, and he had been smitten. Everything about them matched: birth, fortune, beauty. And they were in love. Lady Maria sighed, wiped her eyes once again, and allowed her brother to take her by the arm.

The wedding breakfast was held at

Cadbury House, the Gregory home on the outskirts of Dartmouth. It belonged now to Sir Giles Gregory, Caroline's older brother who had been at school with Robert. Lady Gregory, Caroline's mother, lived with her son, and she was the hostess for the reception.

All in all, the day was a decided success. A highly desirable union had been forged, and all present had had a reasonably pleasant time.

In the spring of 1815 Lady Maria Cheney attended the wedding of her seventeen-year-old goddaughter, Miss Laura Dalwood. It was not as grand an affair as her nephew's wedding had been, but it was quite the most important thing that had happened to the Dalwood family in a very long time. As the years had gone by, the income from Dalwood Manor became insufficient to provide for three sons as well as a daughter.

Laura's marriage to Edward Templeton was the sort of solution to his problems that Sir Charles Dalwood had occasionally dreamed of. At only thirty-three, Mr. Templeton had money—a great deal of money. But when Lady Maria saw Mr. Templeton at the church the following day, she realized that Laura could not simply have been marrying for money. He was not a big man, but he was handsome—beautiful, almost, thought Lady Maria, regarding his fair-skinned, delicately chiseled face and his cap of shining golden hair.

At the end of June 1815, Caroline Cheney bore a son. They called him Robert, at the Earl's request, and he was baptized with great ceremony at St. Peter's Church, where his parents had been married almost exactly nine months earlier.

Lady Maria thought that Caroline looked as if childbirth had taken a great

deal out of her. She was too thin, too delicate-looking. Mark was pleasant, courteous, attentive to his father, his wife, his guests. He did not appear to be overly interested in his son. Lady Maria found something slightly disturbing about his extreme self-possession.

Lady Maria looked with concern at the lovely, unchildlike face of her goddaughter. "You are only eighteen, my dear. You will marry again one day."

The Earl of Dartmouth died in August. It was an occasion of sorrow for his family, but it had not been unexpected.

It was the death of Caroline Cheney in October, almost exactly one year after her marriage, that shocked the family and the county. Lady Maria posted down to Devon from Bath immediately. It was Mark who gave her the dreadful news. "She killed herself, Aunt Maria."

His face absolutely shuttered, he continued in a very controlled voice, "She cut her wrist. I found her lying on her bed. She had been dead for several hours."

"Dear God, Mark!"

Lady Maria stayed at Castle Dartmouth for several months after Caroline's death, running the house and helping to look after the baby. During that time it was made perfectly clear to her by a few of the upper servants, whom she had known for years, that Mark and Caroline had not been happy together. Why that was, no one knew.

"He stayed away from her, my lady," Mrs. Irons, the housekeeper, told her bluntly.

"But what could have happened?"

Lady Maria asked in great bewilderment: "He was so in love with her."

"I don't know, my lady. But I do know that talk is circulating that it was his coldness that drove her to her death, poor lass."

"Oh, no!" cried Lady Maria on a note of pain.

Lady Maria stayed at Castle Dartmouth until the following April when she received a second shocking communication containing tragic news. It came this time from Sydenham Damerel. She was sitting staring at her letter in obvious distress when Mark came into the morning parlor.

"I've just received a letter from my old friend Louisa Dalwood. Her daughter, Laura, who is also my goddaughter, was married last year shortly after you were. Her husband is dead of typhus. He was only thirty-four."

"I'm sorry," said Mark. "It does not appear to have been a lucky year for marriages." There was a note of audible bitterness in his voice.

There was a pause, and then he said, in quite a different voice, "I had a rather important letter myself, Aunt Maria. From the Admiralty. They have offered me command of the frigate *Glasgow*. They want me to undertake a survey of the southern coast of Turkey. I will be posted to the rank of captain." He grinned at her. "God, Aunt Maria, this is like the answer to a prayer!"

"But, Mark, for how long will you be gone?"

"Several years, I expect."

"Several years! But what about your son? What about Robin?"

His face darkened. "He has his nurse. He is only a baby. He doesn't need me."

After a minute he went on, his voice a little strained. "I think it will be better for everyone—Robin included—if I go away

for a while. It will give old wounds a chance to heal. When I come back, perhaps I will be able to be a better father. But right now, I can't. I just can't."

"If you want," she said gently, "I will stay at Castle Dartmouth."

"No." His eyes were brilliant with feeling. "No. You have done enough, Aunt Maria. You must return to Bath."

In the end, that was what she had done: Mark sailed for Turkey, and life for Lady Maria resumed its accustomed round. The situation at Castle Dartmouth remained stable for almost a year. Then Robin's nurse sent notice to Lady Maria that she was leaving her position. And, as she had received a disturbing letter from her goddaughter, Laura Templeton, in the same post as the nurse's resignation, Lady Maria dashed off an invitation to Laura to come to stay with her at Castle Dartmouth for a visit.

The two ladies were having tea in the family drawing room after Laura's arrival and tour of the house and grounds.

"My dear Laura, tell me about yourself. Are you sorry you sold Templeton Hall after your husband died?"

"No. I could not live there, Godmama. But I can't live at home either, it seems. Papa and Mama are forever after me to 'do something with myself.' They want me to go to Bath. They want me to go to London. They want me to get married again is what it all comes down to."

"And you don't want that?"

"No!"

Lady Maria looked with concern at the lovely, unchildlike face of her goddaughter. "You are only eighteen, my dear. You will marry again one day."

"I don't see why," said Laura calmly. "I have money—more than enough to support myself." She looked up from her lap to Lady Maria's face. "You never

married, Godmama, and you have a good life. You are allowed to have your own house, to go your own way."

"Is that what you want, Laura? To set up your own establishment?"

"Yes, I do. But Papa and Mama won't hear of it."

"I think I may have an idea that would suit you. Let me think about it for a little."

"Oh, Godmama, I should be so grateful!" Laura sighed wearily.

In the end, Lady Maria made her suggestion and Laura fell in with it eagerly. She was to live at Castle Dartmouth for a time and help look after Robin. The temporary solution served so well that it stretched from months into years. Laura and little Robin had formed an almost instant bond and it was a tie that grew stronger with every passing day. It was not long before she was fiercely devoted to her small charge. She felt, in fact, like his mother.

Lady Maria came periodically to visit Castle Dartmouth, and with her came the only news they ever had of Robin's father. Lady Maria shared some of her nephew's letters with Laura, who was unabashedly curious about the father of her darling. He inquired periodically about the welfare of his son, but to Laura's alert sensitivity, the inquiries were definitely perfunctory. Quite clearly he did not care about Robin, a situation which only made Laura love the little boy even more.

The only person who seemed to care about Robin besides herself and Lady Maria was his uncle, Sir Giles Gregory. Sir Giles was a handsome, eligible, well-off young man, and clearly he liked Laura. The neighborhood kept expecting to hear an announcement concerning the two of them, but somehow nothing more than friendship ever developed out of their

relationship. Laura herself didn't quite know why Giles kindled no sparks in her breast. His blond, blue-eyed good looks, so like his nephew's, were certainly very attractive. He had given her clear indication on more than one occasion that if she gave him any encouragement he would declare himself. But that encouragement had not been forthcoming, and soon they settled into an easy comradeship that suited them both.

She had come to regard Castle Dartmouth as her home. What would happen when the Earl returned? It was an uncertainty that she tried to think of as seldom as possible.

From all she had heard about Robin's father from local gossip, it seemed that the Earl of Dartmouth was a tough character who had little concern for the feelings of others. His marriage had not been a success, and the blame for that was generally laid at his door. There was a very pretty girl in Dartmouth, now respectably married, whom Giles had pointed out to her once grimly as "my poor sister's rival." Mark evidently had not been faithful to his marriage vows for very long.

It worried Laura. She did not like to think ill of Robin's father. And she was afraid of what would happen when he returned. She had come to regard Castle Dartmouth as her home. What would happen when the Earl returned? It was an uncertainty that she tried to think of as seldom as possible.

The first week of November brought

some unusually fine weather to Devon, and Laura and Robin took full advantage of it. When they returned to the stables after their morning ride Tuesday morning, they were met by news that sent Laura's heart plummeting into her stomach. "His lordship arrived about an hour ago, madam," John, the head groom, informed her gravely.

"Thank you, John," she said a little tremulously. Then, taking a steadying breath, she turned to the child by her side. "Did you hear that, Robin? Your father has come home."

They walked together up the avenue of cedars, and Robin was unusually quiet. Laura took his hand and he looked up at her out of troubled blue eyes. "Do you think he will like me, Laurie?"

"Of course he'll like you, darling. You might feel a little... awkward with him at first, but that will be only because you don't know each other. Don't worry about it."

Monk, the butler, greeted her at the front door with unusual solemnity. "His lordship has asked that you join him in the library."

There was no mention of Robin, and Laura sent him upstairs with a smile.

The library door was open and she said from the doorway, "You wished to see me, my lord? I am Laura Templeton."

"Yes, do come in, Mrs. Templeton. I am pleased to be meeting you at last."

He stood in front of a window and the sun was in Laura's eyes, blurring her vision. "We did not know you were back in England, my lord."

"I landed in Deptford ten days ago and have since been paying courtesy calls on the Lords of the Admiralty. I suppose I should have sent you notice that I was coming. I didn't think of it. I'm sorry."

As he moved out of the glare of the sun and she was able to see him clearly, she

was conscious of sharp surprise. He was different from what she had expected. He was very tall, all lean bone and muscle. His skin was deeply tanned from the sun but she thought, from the color of his hair, that he was naturally fair-skinned. There was little resemblance between his totally masculine good looks and the little boy beauty of Robin.

"There is no need to apologize," she said, and essayed a smile. "This is your house."

He did not smile back. "I understand from my aunt, Lady Maria Cheney, that you have been looking after my son these last three years. I am most grateful." There was a flicker of expression in his brown eyes. "I must admit I had not expected you to be so young, Mrs. Templeton."

"I am twenty-two, my lord," she said shortly. "I am quite old enough to be Robin's mother and I assure you I have looked after him as if he were my own." Her face softened. "He is a delightful child, my lord. So bright. So loving. Will you come up to the nursery to see him?"

"Yes." He looked utterly remote as he waited for her to precede him out of the room.

As she came into Robin's sunny blue-and-white room with the tall silent figure of his father at her back, he looked instinctively at her for reassurance. She smiled a little and said, "Here is your father, darling. Won't you come and say hello?"

"Hello... Papa," he said in an uncertain little voice.

"Hello, Robin," the Earl of Dartmouth said gravely. Then the man smiled. "You've grown into quite a lad."

The Earl stayed in the nursery, looking at Robin's toys, examining his schoolwork. Then he turned to Laura. "You must not let me disturb your

routine, Mrs. Templeton. I know you and Robin must have things to do. Perhaps you will join me for dinner this evening?"

"Thank you, my lord. I should like that."

She could feel her throat beginning to ache and tears prickling behind her eyes. Desperately she tried to beat them back, and so only partly heard his next words.

She dressed for dinner with special care, choosing an evening dress of deep blue silk. She had no idea what they could possibly find to talk about and was relieved and pleased to find that the conversation did not lag.

"Did you enjoy your Turkish expedition?" Laura asked. "Godmama said you had become quite an antiquarian."

He smiled. "I certainly caught the fever, but I lack the necessary classical background. I copied every inscription I could find, but my lack of Greek and Latin made the task very frustrating. I want to put the whole journey down in a book after I get the charts done for the Hydrographic Office. There has been almost no report of what is to be found on the south coast of Turkey since before Byzantine times."

"What you need is a classics scholar, like my brother Edmund, to help you."

He looked interested. "You have a brother who is a classics scholar? I may try to conscript him. But first I must attend to the charts."

On Saturday Lady Maria arrived at Castle Dartmouth. Mark had gone out

with Mr. Farnsworth, the estate agent, so it was left to Laura to greet her.

"My dear, I was so surprised to receive Mark's note yesterday. It is not at all proper for you to be in the house with him without a chaperone."

"I think you are being silly, Godmama," said Laura now. "I am Robin's governess. Lord Dartmouth is his father. There is nothing at all odd or improper in our living in the same house."

"You may think I am being silly, my dear, but I assure you the world will think as I do. And you are not Robin's governess. You are my goddaughter. I was not aware that we paid you a salary for taking care of him."

"Of course you don't pay me to take care of Robin! I do it because I want to, because I love him."

"Precisely. In short, you are not a governess at all, but an attractive young woman of birth and fortune."

"I'm a widow!"

"A very young and lovely and rich widow," replied Lady Maria dryly. "That's even worse." Then, as Laura looked distressed, she continued soothingly. "How do you like Mark?"

"He seems very nice," replied Laura evasively. "Robin is thrilled with him."

"Ah, they have become friends? I am glad to hear it," Lady Maria said smoothly.

There was a step in the hall and then a tall presence filled the doorway. "Aunt Maria," said Mark's quiet voice.

Lady Maria held out her hands to her nephew, and he came across the room and gathered her for a moment into his arms. He then sat down and accepted a cup of tea from Laura.

"It was very thoughtless of you, Mark, to come down to Devon before I was here. We have Laura's reputation to think of."

"The thing is, Aunt Maria, I had no

idea that Mrs. Templeton was so young. It never crossed my mind that I might be putting her in an awkward position."

"Well, let us hope that no permanent damage has been done. I am here now."

Another two weeks went by at Castle Dartmouth, and Mark began the work of recording his survey. His reputation as a scientist was assured. His personal reputation, while gaining ground, was not yet secure. The memory of his tragically dead wife still lingered in Dartmouth. Lady Maria thought there was only one way the ghost of Caroline would ever be put to rest, and she set about rectifying matters with her usual tactful care.

"Whatever are you going to do with Robin when Laura leaves?" she asked her nephew one afternoon.

"Leave? Why ever should she leave?"

"She cannot stay here with you alone, Mark. Surely I have already made that clear to you. And I must be returning to Bath shortly."

"What do you suggest, Aunt?"

She sighed unhappily. "I don't know, my dear. Losing Laura will break Robin's heart. If only there were some way she could honorably stay!"

"All right, Aunt, you have made your point."

"You will think about it?" she asked hopefully.

"I will think about it."

He thought about the conversation on and off for two days and then he asked Laura if he might see her privately in the library. "I should like to discuss Robin's future with you, Mrs. Templeton. My aunt will be leaving for Bath shortly, and she is adamant that you cannot stay here with me without a chaperon."

"Lord Dartmouth, please be assured that I do not regard a chaperon as at all necessary. I am a widow, twenty-two years of age, and I have been taking care

of myself very adequately for four years. I should be happy to stay here with Robin indefinitely."

"You really love him, don't you?"

"Yes. I will do anything to stay with him."

"Will you?" he murmured. He leaned back in his own high-backed chair and surveyed her coolly. "You cannot stay here unchaperoned. I have enough to live down with my neighbors without adding *that* to the tally." It was the first reference he had ever made to his precarious reputation. She could feel her throat beginning to ache and tears pricking behind her eyes. Desperately she tried to beat them back, and so only partly heard his next words.

"What do you suggest?" she asked incredulously.

"You could stay if you married me," he said calmly.

"M-married you, my lord?" she faltered.

"Yes, Mrs. Templeton. I am asking you to marry me. It seems the best solution all around. From my point of view, our marriage would have several advantages, the chief of which will be to gain you as a mother for Robin."

"But... marriage! Surely there is some other way, my lord. We scarcely know each other."

"We know enough, I should think," he returned levelly. "Mainly I know that you love Robin and that he loves you. I do not want to have to separate him from you. And, then, I shall have to marry again anyway. One child is not sufficient to secure the succession."

She felt a cold shiver run down her spine. He sounded so callous. "From your point of view, the arrangement would have merit also, I believe," his cool voice was going on. "You are comfortable here at Castle Dartmouth. You have

friends in the neighborhood. You will not find me an unreasonable husband. Come, Mrs. Templeton, let us be practical. You are not, as you pointed out earlier, a green girl. You have been married before."

He was a stranger and she had a suspicion that he would always keep his distance from her. But that would not stop him for doing his duty. No, she couldn't do it.

"Yes," Laura said colorlessly. She looked at her hands lying clasped together in her lap. "May I have a little time to think about this, my lord?"

"Certainly." He rose to his feet, indicating the interview was over. "There is no hurry—so long as Aunt Maria remains."

"Yes," said Laura stiffly. "I understand that perfectly. I shan't keep you waiting for long." With proud grace she turned her back on him and left the room.

She went to her room after first checking on Robin and setting out some puzzles for him to work on. She had been offered a marriage of convenience and she must decide if it would indeed be convenient for her to accept.

She thought suddenly of the big four-poster bed that stood so majestically in the middle of the Earl's bedroom that adjoined Robin's smaller chamber, and she shivered. She couldn't do it. He was a stranger and she had a suspicion that he would always keep his distance from her. But that would not stop him from doing his duty. No, she couldn't do it.

Someone knocked on her door and

when she called, "yes," Robin came into the room and climbed up next to her on the bed. "Would you like to read me a book?"

She looked into her boy's beautiful little face and forced a smile. "Go and get one," she said gently. As she watched him, she realized she had no choice. She would tell Lord Dartmouth that she would marry him.

Mark had not seemed surprised by her answer. Nor had he seemed terribly pleased. She had made the sensible decision, he told her pleasantly.

"Now, where shall you be married from?" asked Lady Maria. "Castle Dartmouth?"

"No!" said Mark violently. Both women stared at him in surprise. "London," he said at last. "We'll stay at Cheney House and be married at St. George's, Hanover Square."

Lady Maria beamed. "Excellent. I will make arrangements about where Laura's parents can stay. And after the wedding breakfast I will bring Robin back to Devon and await you here. That will give the two of you a chance to have a little honeymoon by yourselves in London."

Laura barely repressed a shiver at her words.

On the morning of her wedding, her maid dressed her in the pale rose saracenet morning dress she and Lady Maria had chosen. She felt as if she were a sleep-walker moving through a dream as she got into the crested carriage that was to take her to Hanover Square. Her somnambulish sensation continued throughout the ceremony and the wedding breakfast that followed. After the breakfast, Lady Maria determined to make a start on the journey back to Devon, and she packed up Robin and took him away, leaving the newly married couple alone together at

Cheney House.

It was ten o'clock by the time they finished dinner and Laura rose to leave him to his wine. "I'll await you in the drawing room," she said as she stood facing him over the candlelit table.

He had stood up when she did, and now he smiled and shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't want any more wine." He started coming around the table toward her. He was very close to her now and there was a smile in his eyes. "It's time we put ourselves to bed, I think."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I suppose we should." And she walked beside him up the stairs to their bedrooms.

Laura was brushing out her hair when the connecting door between their bedrooms opened and Mark came in wearing a silk dressing gown. After a quick glance at him, Laura remained perfectly still, looking at her reflection in the mirror. She wore a lacy white negligee that was cut low enough to show off the creamy silkiness of her shoulders. She did not hear his feet on the thick carpeting and started a little when he appeared behind her in the mirror and rested his hands on the nape of her neck, his fingers against her hair. "I have often wondered what your hair would look like down," he said softly. "It is beautiful."

She sat perfectly still, as if frozen into immobility. She tipped her head back a little to look at him and he bent forward and kissed her throat. He was still standing behind her and his hands pulled her back against him and then covered her breasts.

She was trembling, stiff and tense under his touch, and after a minute he let her go. "What is the matter?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"I... nothing," she answered, bending her head so that her hair swung forward to hide her face.

He put a hand on her shoulder and forced her to turn around. Then he sank down on his heels in front of her. "Did you have a bad experience before?" he asked patiently.

"No." She looked into his brown eyes. "I suppose I shall have to tell you. If I am nervous it is because I have never done this before."

"Never done... But you were married!"

"It was not a... real marriage. Edward never touched me like you just did. Edward was not interested in women. Not in that way, at any rate. He married me because he wanted a hostess, a chatelaine, and he wanted to better himself socially. He did not want *me*."

"I see." There was a pause, and then he asked quietly, "Did he like men?"

Laura looked at him in surprise. "How did you know?"

"One sees a bit of that in the navy," he replied a little grimly. Then he asked, "Why didn't you tell your parents? You could have gotten an annulment."

"I couldn't," she said a little gruffly. "Edward was very generous to them, you see."

"Yes, I do see." There was an odd expression in his eyes. "I have the strangest wedding nights," he murmured, more to himself than to her.

Then drawing her to her feet, he took her in his arms and kissed her. His mouth was gentle, the kiss slow and tender, and after a minute Laura felt herself beginning to relax. Then he slid his hands into her hair and kissed her again. This time his mouth was hard, asking, demanding a response from her. And she gave it, slipping her arms around his neck so that her breasts were crushed against the hard wall of his chest, opening her mouth for the startling but sweet invasion of his tongue. After a minute, and without letting go of

her mouth, he straightened up. Her feet left the floor and he walked with her the few steps necessary to reach the bed. He laid her down and released her only long enough to remove his dressing gown. Then he was beside her again and his hands began to move over her thinly clad body. When he lifted her out of her nightgown, she made no protest, conscious only of his growing urgency and a growing desire in herself to do whatever he asked because only by satisfying him would she find fulfillment for herself.

He didn't move from where he lay, but put a hand up to gently touch her cheek. She turned her head and kissed his fingers. They did not get up for another hour and a half.

Laura woke early the next morning as the first light was slanting grayly in through the blinds. She raised herself a little to look down at Mark sleeping beside her.

"Good morning," he said in a soft low voice that sounded to her sensitive ears like a caress.

"Good morning," she replied. And smiled.

He didn't move from where he lay, but put a hand up to gently touch her cheek. She turned her head and kissed his fingers. They did not get up for another hour and a half.

They stayed in London for two weeks, during which time Laura fell in love. She flattered herself that she was getting to know Mark very well. The few people Mark and Laura saw in London during

this time were all naval. They went to a dinner given by Viscount Melville, who was the present First Lord of the Admiralty, and there Laura met a number of men who had known Mark over the course of his career.

After dinner the ladies retired to the drawing room and Laura found herself the object of much curiosity, both covert and overt.

"Such a tragic thing, poor Caroline," Lady Morton said to her as they sat together on a velvet sofa. "I'm afraid everyone rather blamed Dartmouth for it, which was probably most unfair. For a while there it looked as if his career in the navy was finished. There were a great number of disappointed young men when she married Dartmouth. And then to hear that that lovely, charming child had killed herself! It was a tremendous shock."

"I see," said Laura slowly. "Was it just the shock...or were there other rumors?"

"Oh, nothing terrible, nothing that seventy-five percent of the married men in London don't do. Ignore their wives, I mean, and take a mistress. Only Caroline was such an obvious innocent, so fragilely lovely, so in love, that in her case it seemed very cruel. Especially, of course, in light of what happened." Lady Morton suddenly reached over and covered Laura's hand.

"I shouldn't have said all that. It is over and finished with, my dear. One shouldn't dwell on the past. It isn't healthy."

At this point there was the sound of men's voices in the saloon and then Lord Melville appeared in the drawing-room doorway. He was talking to Mark. He said something to Lord Melville, who laughed, and then he was coming across the room toward her with the swift and unwavering gait of a man who is intent on

claiming possession.

Laura was only too happy to be claimed, and when, after another hour, he suggested they leave, she took her departure with a prompt obedience that brought a glint of amusement and something else to her husband's eyes.

The winter months of January and February went by, and Mark was deeply involved in work on his charts. Often he would spend eight to ten hours at a time in the library.

At the end of February he was elected to the Royal Society, Britain's most prestigious scientific club, and went up to London for a few weeks to meet his fellow members. He asked Laura if she wanted to come with him, but she felt she would only be a nuisance. She was always afraid to presume too much with him; she was acutely conscious that their marriage had not been made for love. The fact that she had fallen in love with him did not mean he had done the same with her. He desired her, she certainly knew that, but she was adult enough to realize that a man could desire where he did not love. So she did not go to London with Mark, even though she would have liked to do so. His easy acquiescence in her refusal only confirmed her belief in her own superfluity.

He was gone for two weeks, during which time Laura's outward existence seemed remarkably unchanged. They had not engaged a governess for Robin, and so life for Laura continued in almost the same pattern as it had before her marriage. It was, then, a little disconcerting to find herself missing him so much during the weeks of his absence. Outwardly her days might not have changed, but inwardly she had changed very much. Her husband had become the focal point of her emotional life. She longed quite desperately for him to come home.

Over dinner the night he returned to Castle Dartmouth, Mark told her about his trip to London and about some of the men he had met. Then he asked what she had been doing in his absence.

"Oh, the same things I have been doing for years," she responded with a deprecatory smile. "At present I am organizing the Easter party for the children at the orphanage. Do you mind if we use the grounds here?"

"Of course I don't mind. You might use the ballroom to serve the food. April can be chilly."

"What a good idea. Thank you, darling." She looked down at her plate and then carefully put down her fork. That "darling" had slipped out unintentionally. She looked up to find him watching her. It was the look that could always make her heart swim.

"This sort of life suits you, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied with outward calm. "I like my garden, my charities, my neighbors, my boy. I like making a home." For you, she added silently. I like making a home for you. But she was afraid to tell him so. She did not know if he would want to hear it. The problem was, she was not, she could not be, so sure of him.

"I'm happy to hear that," he replied, and there was absolutely no expression in his voice. "It seems our marriage was a good idea after all."

"For me it was," she replied quietly.

He looked at her in silence for a minute and then he smiled. She was conscious again of his magnetism, his charm. He stood up. "Come upstairs and I'll show you how I feel about it," he said softly.

She didn't reply, but allowed him to take her arm and escort her upstairs to her bedroom.

The good weather held, and three days

later Mark suggested Laura and Robin accompany him on an expedition to Dartmouth Castle, the imposing Norman fortress that had housed the Earls of Dartmouth until a hundred years previous when Castle Dartmouth, a more comfortable country home, had been built. It had come out in conversation the previous night that Laura had never been in it.

The castle was truly impressive, and Mark was an excellent tour guide. When Mark mentioned a magic word, Robin's entire small body quivered with delight. "Dungeons? Did you say dungeons, Papa?"

"Only a few small cells down at the level of the river, but they are certainly cold and damp and dark enough to qualify for that label."

Then Laura felt the stone against which she was leaning give way beneath her. She was falling and screamed as she blindly reached out for something to grab on to.

"May I see them?" Robin was tugging at Mark's arm in his excitement.

"I suppose so. Laura, do you want to see the dungeons?"

"No, thank you," she replied firmly.

"Very well, Robin and I will investigate the dungeons by ourselves. If you'd like to go up to the North Tower, Laura, you'll get a splendid view of the surrounding countryside."

He pointed the way, and he and Robin turned back down the stairs as Laura moved off in the opposite direction and found herself in the tower room. There was a stone balcony outside the archway

that had once held a door, and she stepped outside for a better look. Mark had been right when he said the view was splendid.

She was turning to go back into the tower room when she heard Mark calling her. As she leaned out from the stone parapet to call back to him, there was a dreadful grinding sound. Then Laura felt the stone against which she was leaning give way beneath her. She was falling and screamed as she blindly reached out for something to grab on to. There was nothing.

It was her cloak that saved her. When Laura pitched forward, the cloak caught, and for just a few seconds held her back, so that instead of following the crashing stone to the courtyard sixty feet below, she was left with the lower half of her body flat on the stone floor while from the waist up she dangled forward into space.

For what seemed hours she lay there, afraid that if she tried to inch her way backward she would either unbalance herself and fall forward or that the stone beneath her would give way as the parapet had. Then, after an eternity, she felt Mark's hands grasp her ankles. "I have you, Laura."

Her body moved along the stone, and slowly she was pulled up from her precariously dangling position over the courtyard. Then his hands were around her waist and he lifted her off the balcony entirely and into the safety of the tower room and his arms.

The mood on the ride home was far from the happy expectancy of the earlier trip. It was not until they turned into the gates of the park that Mark said, "I'll find out directly who is responsible for maintenance at the castle. It was inexcusable that that balcony should have been left like that. You might have been killed."

She heard later, from her butler, that Mark had fired the two men who were responsible for keeping Dartmouth Castle in repair.

Laura determined to put all thoughts of the accident out of her mind, and being a girl with basically good nerves, she was largely successful. She never mentioned the incident to anyone at all, and when Lady Monksleigh asked her about it a week later, she was taken by surprise.

"However did you hear about the accident, Louisa?"

"My dear, how does anyone hear about anything? The servants, of course. Mason, one of the men Dartmouth sacked, is the brother of a man who works for us. He has been telling everyone that it was not his fault. He swears there was nothing wrong with the stone when he was there last week."

By the end of two weeks, thanks to Lady Monksleigh, every person of Laura's acquaintance had heard about her accident.

"My poor girl, what a terrifying experience," Giles Gregory said to her when he came to visit Robin five days after Lady Monksleigh's visit.

"It was terrifying and I should like to forget it," she replied tartly. "However, that is difficult to do when every person I talk to insists on bringing the topic up."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was such a touchy subject."

She felt a little ashamed of herself. "I didn't mean to snap at you, Giles. But, truly, I would rather not talk about it."

They were still talking comfortably half an hour later when the door opened and Mark came in. Giles did not remain for long after Mark's arrival, and after he had donned hat and coat and gone on his way, Mark turned to his wife. "It seems to me that fellow is here rather often," he said.

"He comes to see Robin," Laura said

composedly. "They are awfully fond of one another."

He raised an eyebrow in a way that clearly suggested skepticism. "Are you sure it's *Robin* he comes to see?"

"Of course. It's only natural that he be attached to his nephew, Mark. Robin is all the family poor Giles has." Immediately after the words were out of her mouth, Mark's face changed: the visor came down, the mask of cool indifference which he assumed whenever anything associated with his former wife was mentioned.

"True," he said coolly. "That probably explains it."

She wanted to reach out her arms to him, to comfort whatever terrible hurt it was that made him look like that, but she knew she could not. So she only replied helplessly, "Yes, I think it does."

She went up to bed early that night and was half-sitting, half-lying against her pillows reading a book when Mark came through the connecting door between their rooms.

He sat down on the edge of the bed beside her and took the book from her unresisting hand and put it on the bedside table. He began to undo the small pearl buttons of her nightgown, and then, when he had finished, looked for a moment in silence at the bared silk of her beautiful body. He leaned forward to kiss her throat, her breasts. "You're too good to be true, Laura," he murmured.

She slid her fingers into his thick hair. "Mark..." Her voice was husky, and hearing it, he raised his head and found her mouth. It opened under his immediately, sweet and yielding, answering to his desire and hunger with the promise that whatever he might want, he would find it here, in her arms.

During the next few weeks Laura was extremely busy planning the orphanage

Easter party, and she took to using Mark's phaeton on her trips to and from the shops in town and the vicarage. Laura drove extremely well. Better than he did, Mark told her admiringly after driving out with her one afternoon.

"Do you hunt, Laura?"

"I used to hunt when I lived at home. I haven't done much lately, I'm afraid."

"Do you *like* to hunt?" he asked insistently.

"I adore it," she confessed.

"Well, we shall have to get you some horses, then. There is plenty of room in the stables. Certainly you must hunt this winter, since you like it so much."

She was silent for a minute and then she said quietly, "Thank you, Mark. I should like that. But I should like it even better if I were busy doing something else this winter."

The phaeton wheel, she decided, had been sawed through by some malicious prankster. . . She simply could not, would not believe that her husband wished to hurt her. It was impossible.

"Oh? And what is that?"

"Having a baby," she replied. "I think I shall hold off buying horses for a while. I do very much want to have a baby."

"I'm trying, Laura," he said humorously, "I'm trying."

"I know. I've been so impressed by your sense of duty, my lord."

"Have you indeed?" he said dangerously. "If you weren't driving this phaeton, I'd give you something to be impressed with."

Laura raised her hands and the horses increased their speed. "Don't distract me," she said smartly. "You don't want to have an accident, do you?"

He leaned back in his seat. "I'm certain you are far too skillful to have an accident, my love," he said smoothly.

"I hope so," she replied, unaccountably warmed by the endearment, even if he was only teasing her.

It seemed, however, that Laura was not to avoid the accident she had threatened Mark with. And it happened, ironically, the day after their conversation about it.

Laura was driving briskly down the road toward the parsonage when she saw a gig approaching along the road from the opposite direction. She shortened her reins a little and pulled her horses toward the side of the road. The next thing she knew, the phaeton tilted sharply, turned over, and she was thrown from her high seat into the ditch at the side of the road.

She lay still, stunned, the breath knocked out of her. She opened her eyes and recognized Robert Bertram, an independent farmer who lived not far from Castle Dartmouth, bending over her to help her to her feet.

"Hi, there!" came a cry from the road. "What's happened? Why... Lady Dartmouth!" It was Lord Monksleigh, on horseback and alone.

"Lady Dartmouth's carriage lost a wheel, my lord, and she was thrown."

"Laura," said Lord Monksleigh, forgetting formality, "go and sit in Bertram's carriage. As soon as we unharness your horses we'll take you home."

Then the two men proceeded to unharness the horses. Mr. Bertram went to look at the wheel. "My lord," he said in a curious voice, "will you come and look at this for a minute?"

Lord Monksleigh didn't say anything, but when he straightened up, his face was

very grave. "Yes, I see what you mean, Bertram. Don't say anything to Lady Dartmouth. Drive her home and send someone back here for the horses. I'll have a word with her husband about the phaeton later."

The farmer went over to mount his gig to drive Laura home. What neither man told her was that the shaft that held the wheel had been very neatly sawed through.

Mark was working in the library when Robert Bertram escorted Laura up the steps of Castle Dartmouth.

"What happened?" Mark asked sharply when he saw them.

"The wheel came off Lady Dartmouth's phaeton and she was thrown into the ditch, my lord," said the wooden-faced farmer.

Mark's own face became very still. "I see," he said quietly. "I am much obliged to you, Bertram. May I offer you some refreshment?"

"No, thank you, my lord. I'll leave you to see to her ladyship," Bertram said and took his leave.

"Are you all right?" Mark asked Laura quickly.

"Just bruised and sore, I think. Nothing's broken."

"Shall I summon the doctor?"

"No, truly, Mark, I am all right. All I need is a bath and some fresh clothes."

A few minutes later when Mark returned to the library, he was informed that Lord Monksleigh was in the Chinese saloon and desired to talk to him. Mark walked to the designated room, a look of guarded remoteness on his unusually white face.

The Easter party for the orphanage children was a great success, with a surprising number of Laura's wellborn

neighbors including Lord and Lady Monksleigh, Lord and Lady Countisbury, and Sir Giles Gregory attending as well.

Laura was too busy with the children to pay much attention to her neighbors, but she finally made her way to the small dining room, where food had been served to her wellborn guests.

Laura accepted some food from one of her footmen and said serenely to her friends, "It was wonderfully generous of Mark to let us bring the children here."

Lady Monksleigh cleared her throat. "Laura," she said a little awkwardly, "has Lord Dartmouth spoken to you about your accident? About the phaeton, I mean?"

"What do you mean?"

That lady hesitated and then looked at her husband. "The wheel shaft on the phaeton was sawed through, Lady Dartmouth," he said heavily. "I spoke to Dartmouth about it Thursday afternoon. I thought he would certainly have told you."

"Perhaps," said Lady Countisbury with deadly sweetness, "he fired one of the stableboys."

Laura felt her breath beginning to come shallowly. What were they talking about? What were they insinuating. "Sawed through? But by whom?" said Laura dazedly; and then, as they all looked down at their plates, she knew. They thought Mark had done it. But good God—why? Why should he do such a thing?

She pushed back her chair. "Excuse me," she said "I must get back to the children." And she fled.

Why had Mark not told her?

The week following Easter was outwardly much like any of the weeks that had preceded it. Sir Giles Gregory visited

Laura at different times, and attempted to bring up the question of the damaged phaeton, but Laura had changed the subject.

The phaeton wheel, she decided, had been sawed through by some malicious prankster. It had quite possibly been meant to harm Mark, not her. After all, it was Mark's phaeton. She simply could not, would not, believe that her husband wished to hurt her. It was impossible.

Her knees and her hands were shaking. Was it true? Was someone actually trying to harm her? Perhaps to kill her? A strange sense of unreality swept over her. . . .

A few days later it was cool and overcast, a perfect day for fishing. Laura left Robin in the charge of one of the maids and headed happily for the lake accompanied by Giles Gregory, who had unexpectedly arrived. Before they had come out of the trees they heard Robin shouting and both broke into a run, arriving on the shore to find that the boat was not in its accustomed mooring but out in the middle of the lake. Robin was in it.

"Robin, bring that boat back here this instant!" Laura shouted furiously.

"I can't, Laurie," the little boy screamed back. "I can't move it. It's all full of water!"

"Oh, my God." Laura turned to look at Giles. He was deathly white.

"I can't swim," he said in anguish.

"Oh, my God," Laura repeated. she waded a little way into the cold water, and Giles grabbed her arm. "He's out too far, Laura. You can't get to him. It's too

deep."

There was the sound of someone crashing through the trees. "What's going on here?" said a deep, familiar voice, and Mark was beside them. He took one look and sat down on the grass and dragged his boots off. He waded into the water and began swimming toward the rapidly sinking boat. There was a brief struggle in the water as it looked as if the frantic boy were going to drown both of them, and then Mark was swimming back toward the shore, Robin's head braced firmly on his shoulder.

Once on shore Mark wrapped his own russet coat around his small shivering son, carried him up to the house with Laura and Giles following closely behind.

Back at Castle Dartmouth, Laura was sitting in front of her dressing table wearing a pale apricot-colored dressing gown brushing her hair when Mark came in. "Thank God you were there," she said simply. "I thought he was going to drown in front of me." And then she began to cry helplessly, her hands to her face, the tears dripping out between her fingers.

"Laura," he said, "who is the person who always uses that boat?"

The question was quiet, but she sensed behind it some intolerable strain. "Why, I am," she said. Then her eyes widened as she realized what he was saying. "You don't mean..." Her voice broke off.

There was a silence. He said, not pleasantly, "I am merely pointing out to you what I am all too certain will be shortly called to your attention by others. In the normal course of events, it would have been you in that boat." She met his eyes.

"Mark..." she said uncertainly, "what are you saying?"

"Only what everyone else will say," he repeated. "The boat was tampered with."

"But who would do such a thing?" she

whispered.

He rose to his feet and stood looking at her. There was utter silence in the room. "I don't know," he said at last. He sounded tired. "I shall try to find out." Without another word he turned and left the room.

Laura stayed where she was for quite some time after he had gone. Her knees and her hands were shaking. Was it true? Was someone actually trying to harm her? Perhaps to kill her?

A strange sense of unreality swept over her. Why had Mark been there? He hadn't been out of the library all week, yet just at the time the boat would normally have been launched, he had appeared.

She felt suddenly hot and clammy, and the room began to go out of focus. Abruptly she put her head down, and then, after a minute, stumbled over to the bed and lay down. She felt too unwell to go down to dinner that evening, and Mark did not stop by to see how she was.

They did not go to Lady Monksleigh's ball the following evening. Laura simply could not face the ordeal of pretending that nothing had happened.

It was four days after the accident at the lake, and Laura was cutting flowers in the garden when Giles tracked her down. "I have to talk to you, Laura," he said determinedly. "You must face up to things, you know. You cannot keep hiding from the truth. The truth that you are in danger. Laura, please listen to me. You must leave Castle Dartmouth."

"No," she said.

"For God's sake, Laura"—Giles was almost shouting—"don't you realize what is going on here? That boat was tampered with! If Robin hadn't been naughty and taken it out, you would have died. You would have drowned."

"No, I wouldn't," she replied stubbornly. "Mark would have rescued me,

just as he rescued Robin.”

“Would he have, Laura?” Giles’s voice was quiet now, almost ominously so. “I tend to doubt that.”

“Giles”—there was a desperate note in Laura’s voice—“don’t say that! Mark has no *reason* to wish harm to me.”

He put his hands up to his eyes and his voice was scarcely a thread of sound. “I wonder if he needs a reason.”

“What do you mean?” she whispered in return.

“Just that Mark seems to be an unlucky husband. Look”—he took her hands and held them tightly—“maybe I’ve got this all wrong, maybe he’s as pure as the driven snow, but *something* is wrong here. You have had three nearly fatal ‘accidents’ in less than two months. For your own safety, for my peace of mind, will you *please go* visit your parents for a few weeks?”

He was holding her hands so tightly he hurt her. Gently she pulled away from his grip. “I’ll think about it,” was all she would say.

Did she feel as she did about Mark only because of a physical attraction? Was she so shallow that she was ready to ignore all the evidence against him just because she adored making love with him?

She did think about it. She had, unfortunately, a great deal of time to think in. She could not bring herself to go back to the lake. She would not visit any of her friends or go into town, where she might meet someone.

She saw Mark only at dinner; the rest of the time he worked in the library. They had reached the point she imagined he must have reached with Caroline. They inhabited the same house, and that was the extent of their relationship.

She thought this as she sat watching him at dinner ten days after the incident at the lake. He is so utterly shut in on himself and alone, she found herself thinking. I can’t reach him. But what had caused his steady withdrawal, she did not know. Was it really possible he wanted to hurt her?

She lay in bed that night, sleepless as usual, and listened for Mark’s step next door. It didn’t come, and at two in the morning she got up, put on a warm velvet robe, took a candle, and made her way downstairs to the library. The door was closed, but a light showed underneath it, and slowly Laura pushed it open.

Mark was sitting slumped behind his desk, which contained, instead of the usual meticulous charts, several wine bottles, all of them empty. As she stepped farther into the room his lashes lifted suddenly and he looked at her. “I came to see if you were all right. It is two in the morning. Come to bed, Mark,” she said softly. “It’s late.”

“Is that an invitation?” he asked insolently.

Instinctively she put her hand behind her and felt the doorknob. “No,” she said. “It is not.”

He began to walk across the room toward her. “Laura...” he said. She could see, now that he was so close, that his eyes were heavy with wine.

She tried to speak, but nothing would come. Then he had her in his arms, and lowering his face to hers, began to kiss her. For a moment she was passive under the bruising power of his mouth, sensing something in his embrace that had never

been there before. With a slight shock she recognized it as desperation. Later she was to think that if she had had any sense at all she would have pushed him away and run. She did neither. Instead, she put her arms around his neck and clung to him, answering his need with the yielding sweetness of her mouth and body.

When he finally let her go and spoke, she hardly recognized his voice. "You're right," he said, "it's time for bed." His voice might have been slurred and unsteady, but his steps were firm as he picked her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs to her bedroom.

When Laura awoke later the following morning, she was alone. She lay still for a while, remembering the passionate abandonment of the night before, and thinking. What to do? What to do? Her instincts told her one thing, her reason something else. Did she feel as she did about Mark only because of a physical attraction? Was she so shallow that she was ready to ignore all the evidence against him just because she adored making love with him?

Later that day Laura went riding and took her favorite shortcut across the park on her way home. It was a lovely sunny day and the mare seemed as pleased as she to be galloping along on the spring-softened turf. They approached the ha-ha at a strong, steady gallow and the mare's ears flicked forward. The mare took off with faultless precision; this was a jump she had made countless times before. They were in the air over the ditch when the world was shattered by a blinding shaft of light. Laura could see nothing. She felt the mare falling beneath her, and more from instinct than from reason she pushed herself out of the saddle. She hit the ground and knew no more.

When she awoke she was in her own bed, and she opened her eyes to see Dr.

Redding.

There was a movement behind the doctor, and Mark came into view. "What happened?" she asked him.

"We were hoping you could tell us," he answered in a tense voice. "You were jumping Annabel over the ha-ha when she fell."

"Yes." Laura remembered it now—the flash of light that had splintered the day. "Annabel?" she asked.

Mark said, "The mare broke her leg, Laura. I'm sorry, Thank God you had the presence of mind to jump clear of her. If she had fallen on you, you might have been killed."

She closed her eyes. "That's a phrase I seem to be hearing a great deal of these days," she said.

The doctor coughed. "You most assuredly have a concussion, Lady Dartmouth. I want you to stay in bed for a few days. I am leaving a sleeping draft for you. Rest is most important."

When she opened her eyes again, both Dr. Redding and Mark had gone.

She obeyed the doctor and spent the next few days in her room. At least there, she thought, she was safe. Why, she thought over and over, would anyone want her dead? The evidence all pointed to Mark, but he had no *reason* to wish ill of her.

It was while she was lying on her chaise longue watching Robin build with blocks that the answer came to her. The more she thought of Mark's face, of how he had looked this last month, and bitter anger began to burn in her heart. Why hadn't she seen it before? she castigated herself. Of course there was a motive; she had just been too self-involved and frightened to see it.

It was not until three days after her accident that she saw Mark.

"Someone shone a mirror into the mare's eyes," she said without preamble. "That's why she fell."

"I know," he replied in a colorless voice. "Evans found it among the trees." He put a hand up to his forehead for a minute and then said, "Laura, I want you to go away from Castle Dartmouth. Go to your parents or to Aunt Maria. You are well enough to travel now, so I suggest you leave tomorrow. You may take Robin with you."

"If I do that," she replied soberly, "everyone will most certainly blame you."

"What does it matter?" he said with weary bitterness. "They can't blame me any more than they do now, more than I do myself for keeping you here for as long as I have."

She looked at his shadowed face. "Mark," she said very softly, "darling, who hates you so much that he would try to destroy you like this?"

"God, Laura, I don't know!" The words were a cry of anguish. "All I know is someone is using you to get at me. And I can't allow it to continue any longer. You must get away from here!"

"Only if you'll go with me," she said firmly, and stood up.

There was a pause; then his shoulders came away from the door in a kind of a lunge and he was across the room and had her tightly in his arms. "How did you know it wasn't me?" he asked shakily.

"I didn't know until yesterday," she answered honestly. "I was so confused...and scared, too. Everything seemed to point to you, yet somehow I couldn't make myself believe that you were capable of murder. It wasn't until yesterday, when the thought crossed my mind that *you* were being as badly hurt by this business as I was, that the truth finally dawned on me."

"Everyone else seemed to believe I was capable of murder."

She flushed a little. "Everyone else isn't married to you. I mean, the way you behaved to me on our wedding night...well, a man like that just doesn't go around murdering people. I knew you hadn't married me for love, but you have always...I mean, you...Oh, you know what I mean! And then, the accidents were so clumsy. If you wanted to get rid of me, you would have been much cleverer. Why, you're a scientist! Really, the more I thought about it, the clearer it became that the accidents were staged not to kill me but to throw suspicion on you." She put her cheek against his chest. "I'm only sorry it took me so long to see it. But you...went away, rather. *Why* didn't you tell me, Mark?"

"I discovered on our wedding night that she wasn't a virgin. It wouldn't have been so bad, Laura, if she hadn't tried to deceive me!" he said passionately.

"I couldn't. There had been all that talk about Caroline—how I had driven her to her death—and now there were these strange accidents befalling you. How could I expect you to believe that I wasn't some deranged wife-slayer? I was afraid you wouldn't believe me," he said slowly. "And that I just could not have borne."

His hands very gently cupped her face. Then his mouth came down on hers and he was kissing her with a passionate intensity that awoke an instant response in her. "Who said I didn't marry you for love?"

he murmured finally against her hair.

"You did." She released her grip a little so she could look at him. "You said our marriage was a 'solution,' that you needed a mother for Robin, that you needed more children because one wasn't enough to 'secure the succession.'"

He looked a little sheepish. "Did I really say that?"

"You did."

"Well, I was trying to sound practical, Laura. I wanted you to marry me, you see. I wanted it very badly. I didn't want to frighten you away."

"You almost did!" she said indignantly. "You sounded horrible!"

"I'm sorry, love. When you walked into the library that first day, I thought that I had never seen anyone more lovely in my life. It wasn't just Robin I wanted you for. It was for myself as well."

"Why didn't you tell me that?" she asked wonderingly.

"I didn't think you wanted to hear it. You never gave any sign that you regarded me as anything more than Robin's father. I thought that since that was my trump card, I had better play it." She heard the smile in his voice. "It worked."

He picked her up in his arms and carried her over to the bed, where he began to undress her efficiently.

"I love you so, darling," she said. "I love you."

It wasn't until a good deal later that the Earl and Countess of Dartmouth got around to discussing their chief problem again. "You must go away," Mark said definitely. "You simply aren't safe. If I stick to you wherever you go, it will only be grist to the enemy's mill. He wants to involve me."

"Well, on at least one occasion you saved us from a fatality. If you hadn't been at the lake..." She looked at him curiously. "Why were you there, Mark?"

You hadn't been out of the library in days."

"I saw you going off with Giles Gregory from the library window," he confessed. "I just didn't like to see you spending so much time in his company."

"You don't think *Giles*..."

"No, no, nothing like that. I was jealous, I suppose. I don't like Giles," he confessed. "I'm afraid he reminds me too much of Caroline. I'd like to tell you about Caroline," he said. "Perhaps it will explain a few things to you."

"I was twenty years old when I married Caroline," he began. "She was eighteen."

"I had been home two months after my brother's death, two months of listening to Papa going on about my duty to my line, when I received an invitation to Cadbury House. One look at Caroline, and I fancied I was in love. Amazingly, she seemed to return the sentiment, and when I proposed a month later, she accepted. We were married in October. I discovered on our wedding night that she wasn't a virgin. It wouldn't have been so bad, Laura, if she hadn't tried to deceive me!" he said passionately.

"After two weeks at Cheney House, we returned to Castle Dartmouth, and about six weeks later Caroline told me she was going to have a child."

"Oh, no." Now Laura's eyes were wide with horror. "You mean Robin..."

"Yes. I mean Robin. I had slept with her only that one time, on our wedding night. I was too angry and hurt to go near her again. So of course I asked her whose child it was. This time she was truthful. She didn't know."

"Mark, who was her... her lover?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me. I thought, she can have my name and my home, but I'm damned if she's going to have *me*. I was going to make her suffer,

you see. I even started to see some girl in the town."

"Then Robin was born. God, how I hoped he'd look like me! But he didn't. He was the image of Caroline. Then my father died. While he had been alive I had tried to keep up some pretense of normality, but after he died we behaved like what we were—two strangers who happened to inhabit the same house. I had no idea it was so impossible for Caroline." He put his elbows on the table and rested his forehead in his hands. "You can imagine how I felt when she killed herself." His voice was muffled, "I was greatly at fault, Laura. She had erred, but I was the more to blame. Then all those rumors started circulating. . ."

"You said you wanted a baby. Well, let me tell you making babies takes time. And effort." He pushed her back down on the bed and then threw himself down beside her. . .

"I applied for a ship almost immediately. I determined while I was away for those four years that I would not make the same mistake with Robin that I had with Caroline."

"Robin may not have your coloring, but he *does* have a look of you, darling. And too, he is so tall. . ."

"No, Laura." His voice was quiet but firm. "That kind of speculation is exactly what I promised myself I would not do. Robin is himself and he deserves to be loved as himself. Whether he is mine by blood is not important. He is mine in every other way. My son. We must—neither of us—engage in fruitless

and destructive guessing games about his parentage."

"Oh, Mark." She came around the table and knelt before him, her arms around his waist, her face against his shoulder.

"You said you wanted a baby. Well, let me tell you, making babies takes time. And effort." He pushed her back on the bed and then threw himself down beside her, one leg across hers, his face very close. "Are you prepared to cooperate?" he asked with mock severity.

"Oh, well," she said, "if it's in a good cause."

"The best of causes, my love," he murmured, brushing his mouth against hers. "The very best."

Laura held firm about not leaving Castle Dartmouth unless Mark came with her.

"All right, Laura, all right," he had finally given in. "I think perhaps we should go to Cheney Manor in Derbyshire. It's a nice little manor house and it shouldn't take too long to get it ready for us."

As her first week at Cheney Manor drew to a close, Laura felt freer and lighter of heart than she had in quite some time. The house was comfortable, and the staff, if inexperienced, was willing and pleasant. There were only two immediate problems that disturbed Laura's comfort: she needed a horse to ride, and Robin needed a friend to play with.

Careful inquiry had led her to believe that both of her problems might be solved in one place. The great house of the neighborhood was Wymondham, which belonged to David Wrexham, the Earl of Wymondham. From what Laura had discovered, the Earl had a huge stable of horses—mostly racehorses that he trained himself. And he also had four children,

one of whom was about Robin's age.

As it happened, when Laura and Robin went fishing they encountered a man and two boys fishing on the opposite side. "Hullo," called the younger of the boys. "You must be the new people at Cheney Manor. Come on over and fish our side. It's better over here."

The man, unquestionably one of the handsomest Laura had ever beheld, smiled as she approached. "You must be Lady Dartmouth," he said in a deep, soft voice. "I'm Wymondham."

Laura held out her hand. "How do you do my lord. I'm delighted to meet you."

The boys were introduced and by the end of the morning the three children were wet, dirty, and thoroughly pleased with one another. Lord Wymondham, who was extremely nice, chatted idly to Laura, and when he learned she had not brought a horse with her, offered to let her ride one of his.

Laura pulled up before the Wymondhams, who were leaning against the gate watching her. "She's just lovely," she said, patting the mare's glossy chestnut neck.

Laura and Mark remained at Cheney Manor for the rest of May and all of June, and during that time Laura had no accidents. Lord and Lady Wymondham became close good friends, and for the first time in months she and Mark were able to live a normal life.

Toward the end of June, Laura told Lady Wymondham about her accidents. "Do you know, Laura," said slowly, "I shouldn't be surprised if this goes back to Caroline's death. You said there were ugly rumors going around then too. That's odd, you know. One would think one's reaction to a man whose wife had killed herself would be sympathy. It sounds as if your saboteur was at work even then. Was Caroline having an affair with someone

else?" Jane asked bluntly.

"I don't think it was an affair," Laura said, "but she was in love with someone else before they married."

Jane looked grimly triumphant. "I should look there," she advised. "Someone blames Mark for her death and is out to make him pay."

Laura shared Jane's thoughts with Mark. "I have no idea who Caroline's lover was," he told Laura again.

"Perhaps when we go up to London we might hear something," Laura murmured.

Mark looked bleak. "God, Laura, I wish I hadn't got to go to London." The King was to be formally crowned as George IV on July 19, and Mark, as one of the peers of the realm, had been summoned to attend. "Just one moment. What do you mean, when 'we' go up to London? You are staying right here where you'll be safe."

"I am not staying here," she said calmly. "I'm coming with you. Don't you see what a perfect opportunity the coronation gives us for showing our solidarity to the world? If the saboteur sees that I am going to stick with you no matter what, he may simply give up trying. I talked it over with Jane this afternoon. She and David have to go to the coronation as well, and she's invited us to stay with them at Hawkhurst House. I should be quite safe there surrounded by the Wymondham servants. And when I go out, Jane has promised she will stick to me like a plaster."

"Laura..." he began very gently, and she knew he was going to refuse.

"And there is another reason I should like to go to London," she added hastily. "I should like to consult Dr. Danbury. I'm going to have a baby, Mark."

"A baby..." He looked suddenly very alarmed. "Of course you must see this

Danbury," Mark said instantly.

Mark took her in his arms, and she whispered, "Aren't you pleased about the baby?"

"I am because I know how much you want one. Will you promise me not to stir from Jane's side?"

He sat holding her quietly for what seemed a very long time. "You ought to go to bed, love," he said at last. "It's important for you to get enough rest."

"Mm," she murmured. "Come with me?"

"Are you feeling well enough?" His voice was so husky, so deeply tender.

"I'm fine. It's... it's in the morning that I feel sick."

"In the morning. Well, isn't that convenient," he said.

"Convenient for whom?" she asked.

"For me," he answered.

"Everyone recalls Lord Dartmouth's first wife, as well, and comments upon how chancy being married to him appears to be. There is some speculation as to whether she really committed suicide."

The two couples arrived in London the first week in July. Not long after they arrived, Jane sent a note around to the Marchioness of Rayleigh, her uncle's wife, and the following morning the Marchioness called.

"Jane has been telling me of your dilemma, Lady Dartmouth," the Marchioness said after Jane introduced Laura.

Laura looked alarmed and cast a reproachful look in Jane's direction. "The

story of your accidents is all over London," Jane said tersely.

"What exactly is being said?" Laura was rigidly upright on her chair, her hands clasped tensely in her lap.

"That you have been the victim of several attempts on your life," the Marchioness replied bluntly. "Everyone recalls Lord Dartmouth's first wife, as well, and comments upon how chancy being married to him appears to be. There is some speculation as to whether she *really* committed suicide."

"It's true enough that someone has tried to hurt me, but the real object of the attacks is my husband. He is a wonderful man, and some vicious person is trying to destroy him."

"Well," said Lady Rayleigh practically, "we shall just have to find out who it is. Jane says you think it might go back to Caroline. Now, here is what we shall do. I am holding a ball in three days' time to which you will all come. In the meanwhile, I shall prepare a list of the men who were dangling after Caroline Gregory six years ago. I'll invite as many of them as are still in town, and we'll all make a point of speaking to them. Then we'll compare our impressions and see if we've reached any conclusion."

Laura and Jane both thought Lady Rayleigh's idea was excellent and engaged to appear at Rayleigh House in three days' time, spouses in tow.

Two weeks before the coronation, the Marquis and Marchioness of Rayleigh held the great ball and the whole world came to it.

Lady Rayleigh had done her homework well and had collected four men who at one time had been serious suitors of Caroline Gregory. "There isn't even a *hint* of thwarted passion among the lot of them," Laura mournfully confided to Jane. They had both retired to a

bedroom, ostensibly to fix their hair.

"There isn't a hint of passion, period," replied Jane, equally gloomy. "David says he never met such a set of dull dogs in his life. I'm afraid we've wasted an evening."

"It hasn't been wasted," Laura replied. "Before we came to town, everyone was convinced Mark was a murderer; now they are not so sure." She smiled at her friend. "It's all *your* doing, Jane, yours and David's." ¹⁶

"It is mainly your doing, Laura. No one who sees you and Mark together could possibly ever believe he was trying to kill you."

And Jane was right. More than her friendship, more than the gracious sponsorship of the Rayleighs, more than the companionship of the Admiralty Lords, it was the expression on his wife's face when she looked at him that told the world Mark was innocent.

Laura was feeling very discouraged the day after the Rayleigh ball and she and Jane drove into town to visit Lady Maria, who was in residence at Cheney House in Berkeley Square. When they arrived at Hawkhurst House they found Giles Gregory on the point of departing. He had been in town since May, he told Laura as they returned into the house and sat in the gallery.

They conversed generally for a short while and then Jane said with her usual directness, "Have you heard these rumors about Lord Dartmouth, Sir Giles?"

"Yes," he said, "I have."

"Well, we're trying to get to the bottom of them," Jane went on briskly. "Perhaps you could help us. I wish to ask you a few questions about your sister. You see, we think these attacks against Mark stem from her death. Now, Sir Giles, tell us: did your sister have anyone who might have cause to hate Mark for marrying her?"

"Not any more than other girls who choose one suitor over another. Caroline chose Mark, you see. He was not a husband she had forced upon her."

Giles was looking distinctly shadowy about the eyes and mouth, and Laura intervened. "That is enough, Jane. I'm certain if Giles could help us he would." She firmly changed the conversation, and in five more minutes Giles took his leave.

Their investigations seemed to be getting them nowhere, yet Laura remained convinced that the answer lay with Caroline. That night she and Mark went over it all again. "If there's any clue, it must lie at Castle Dartmouth," Laura said finally. "She didn't go anywhere else after your marriage."

"Actually, she did leave Castle Dartmouth once," Mark said slowly. "Just before her death, in fact. She went up to London for a week to do some shopping."

"Mark! She must have met the saboteur while she was in London. Tomorrow I'm going down to Cheney House then," Laura declared firmly, "and take the place apart."

True to her word, Laura descended upon Berkeley Square the following morning. Lady Maria had a breakfast engagement but she told Laura to go ahead and search wherever she chose.

She found what she was looking for in the first half-hour of her search. In the desk in the Countess' bedroom, pushed all the way to the back behind stacks of engraved writing paper. Slowly Laura drew out the small leather-tooled book, took it to the window seat and began to read.

It was the entry of September 4, 1815 that riveted Laura's attention. The neat, precise handwriting had degenerated into a scrawl. On a page by itself Caroline had written: "He has come back, and it has

started all over again. Oh, God, what am I to do?"

Laura went pale as she stared at those words, and then slowly she turned the page. The next entry was dated London, September 18. It read: "There is nothing to be done. For me, nothing. I have before me no escape, no hope, no prospect of peace. I love him. God help me."

That was all. Except that Caroline had gone back to Castle Dartmouth and on October 2 she had killed herself. Tears were running down Laura's face and she sat for quite some time by the sunny window, her face bent over the tragic little book.

Mark, magnificently attired in his state robes, and Laura, gorgeous in full court dress, joined the procession of peers and peeresses that gathered in Westminster Hall to go to the Abbey for the coronation.

Laura was in her bedroom waiting for him when Mark arrived back at Hawkhurst House half an hour after she had. "Did you find something?" he asked almost before the door had fully closed behind him.

"Yes," she said, "a diary."

"Did she say who?" Mark asked sharply.

"No. But perhaps you might guess." She handed him the small leather-bound book. "The last two entries," she said. "All the rest is useless."

"Evidently she did not see her lover at all after her marriage until September 4, when he came back. Evidently they also

resumed their affair. That is why she killed herself, Mark, because she was still in love with this unknown man."

"But if she loved this other fellow, why the devil did she marry me?" he cried in frustration.

"Obviously because she couldn't marry *him*," she answered. "Probably he was married already." She leaned a little toward him. "Think, darling. Did anything happen in the beginning of September that year?"

"As I recall, On September 3 the Countisburys had a big party. I remember that."

"Yes, Caroline notes the party as well. But she doesn't seem to have met her lover at that time. The note that says he has come back refers to the day after the party." She pointed to the relevant entry. "See."

"No," said Mark. Laura looked up at him. All the blood had drained from his face. "No," he said again, but this time in almost a whisper. "It can't be. The day after the Countisbury party," Mark said hoarsely, "Giles came home."

Laura's breath sucked in with an audible gasp as full realization hit her. "It was Giles," she said. "Giles who has been arranging the accidents, spreading the rumors. But, Mark," she said in great bewilderment, "he wanted to marry me, once. How could he want to hurt me so much?"

He looked up, his attention arrested. "I didn't know that," he said.

"Oh, it wasn't a grand passion, I don't mean that. When I saw where he was heading, I let him know I wasn't interested."

"And then you married me. How Giles must hate me," he said dully.

"When I think of it," Laura said very slowly, "he has always downgraded you."

"Christ, Laura, what a damnable situation.

"I know. We can't expose him. There's Robin." She went, if possible, even whiter. "My God, Robin. That means that Giles may be. . ."

"It alters nothing about Robin," he said strongly. "He is who he is. But you're right, no one must ever find out. I'm going into London to call on my solicitor. When I get back, I may have a way to handle this situation."

It was almost six o'clock when Mark finally returned. "I talked to Murray and I think I know how we can handle Giles. I shall have to have it out with him, of course."

"He's dangerous," Laura said.

"I know. David will come with me—as a bodyguard."

"What are you going to tell Giles?" she asked.

"I'm going to tell him we found Caroline's diary. I'm going to tell him it reveals their incestuous relationship. I'm going to tell him I have lodged it with my solicitor, to be opened in the event of either of our deaths under suspicious circumstances. I am also going to tell Giles that he must confess and I will keep quiet about his culpability in your accidents if he promises to leave the country. If he comes back, I will publish a copy of his confession to the world. The confession will be lodged with Mr. Murray."

"Will he make a confession?"

"I hope so. At any rate, I'm going in to see him now. David will come with me and wait outside—just to make certain I come back out."

She looked up at him steadily, his beloved face blurred by the tears she was holding back. But it was only after he had left to go face his hate-filled enemy did she break down and cry.

Several hours later, David came into

the dining room alone. "Where's Mark?" Laura asked, going very white.

"He's in the library," David reassured her hastily. "He's fine, Laura, there's nothing to worry about. He got Gregory's confession, but I rather think he'd like to tell you about it himself."

When Mark returned it took some time for the whole story to finally emerge. It had been a shattering interview.

"He agreed to go abroad?" Laura asked.

"Yes. He agreed to everything I suggested. I have never seen a man so utterly defeated."

"He signed a confession admitting to arranging my accidents?"

"Yes, that, too. It seems he got the idea of making it look as if I were trying to kill you after the incident at Dartmouth Castle. That, apparently, was an accident."

They were sitting side by side on the sofa, and now Laura put her cheek against his shoulder and closed her eyes. "The nightmare is almost over, then."

"It is over," he replied firmly. "Giles is leaving for France tomorrow."

"Leaving you still surrounded by all those horrid suspicions."

"The talk will die down when no more accidents occur," he said tranquilly. "It won't be so bad."

The culmination of their London sojourn came on July 19, 1821, when George IV was formally crowned King of England. Mark, magnificently attired in his state robes, and Laura, gorgeous in full court dress, joined the procession of peers and peeresses that gathered in Westminster Hall to go to the Abbey for the coronation. After the ceremony they returned to the Hall for the royal banquet where they drank and ate among the fitted revelers. Mark was not drunk when they finally got into their coach to return home, but then, he was not precisely

sober, either.

They staggered into Laura's bedroom together, only to be met by the censorious eye of her new dresser. Mason stared at her mistress's husband as he lounged at his ease in his wife's bedroom, where, she considered, he had no right to be. At least until his wife was undressed and properly in bed. "My lord..." she began with great dignity.

Mark looked at the ceiling and began to sing. It was regrettably a bawdy and excruciatingly funny seaman's song.

"Mason," Laura gasped, feeling as if she would explode any moment, "go to bed. Please."

Laura fell on the bed laughing. "Oh, God," she wailed, holding her side, "I think I'm going to die! Stop!"

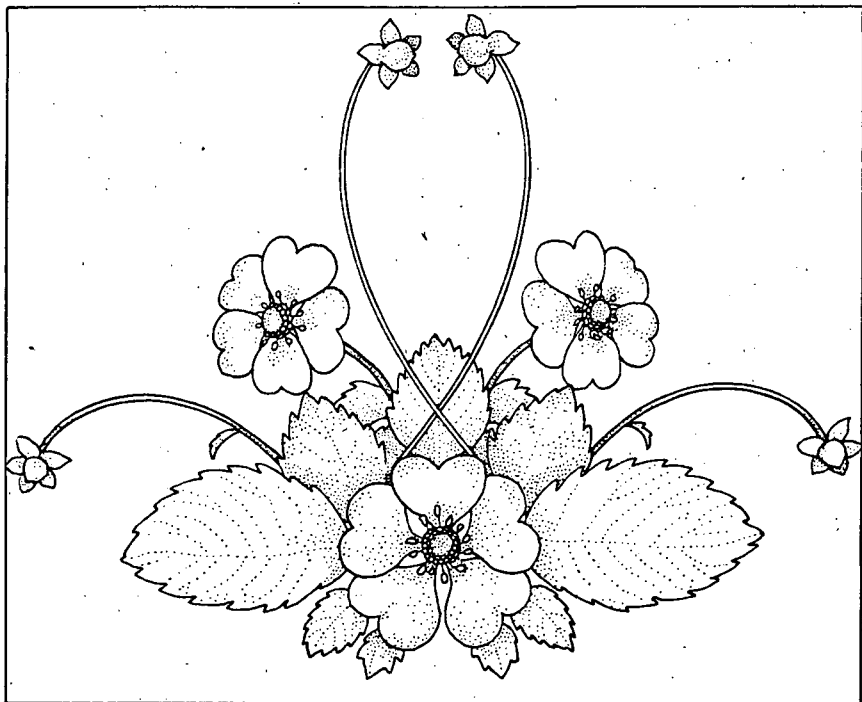
Mark stopped in mid-note and moved on silent feet to the bed. Laura did not hear him and was surprised to feel his hand on her shoulder. He turned her over on her back and she looked up into the lean masculine face that was now so close to hers.

"You and I are going to take a proper honeymoon. Without Robin." His voice was very deep and very tender. "I love you, Laura," he said.

"Mark..." She was looking straight into his golden-brown eyes. Her breath caught a little in her throat. "I love you so much," she said.

"Do you?" he slid a caressing hand over her hip. "Show me how much."

"Mmm," she replied. And did. ♥



Courageous Beauty



Though Ethan Talbot takes an instant dislike to Mattie, he needs a wife for his Western trek. And plain but able Mattie will do, even though he believes that she is her older sister, Felicity!

By JUSTINE SOMMERS

“Miss Mattie! Miss Mattie Gray, where you got to?” shouted old Esther. Her deep voice reverberated throughout the large and almost empty rooms of the once-great white-pillared mansion known as The Willows.

Mattie, in her sister's bedroom, whirled from the wardrobe. Quickly shutting the door upon a closetful of Felicity's elegant dresses, Mattie flew to the doorway and peeked through.

“Oh, there you is,” the old black woman scolded Mattie, catching a glimpse of the girl's unmistakable gold-flecked eyes. “What are you doing there, child? How

many times I got to tell you there ain't no call to go stirring up your poor sister's ghost? Land's sakes, you got all of them chores to do afore massa gets back from town.”

Smitten by her conscience for having dawdled so long in Felicity's room, Mattie pulled on her faded gingham bonnet and flew to the fields. She bent to the work of detaching the bolls from the stalks, her fingers moving nimbly. As always when engaged in such a repetitious task, Mattie fell into a deep reverie.

She thought about Felicity, as she had done obsessively since her sister had died

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of the fever six months before. Mattie still could not accept her sister's death. It seemed impossibly cruel that Felicity, of all the family, should not have been spared. Ever since she had been a child, Mattie had regarded Felicity as a kind of princess, touched by magic, who would grow up to marry the prince and live in a castle happily ever after.

Felicity, older than Mattie by one year, was beautiful, and Mattie was plain. It was Felicity their gentle mother had fluttered around with hot curling irons and the finest of organdy and dimity dresses. It was Felicity who had been sent to finishing school in faraway Memphis, after their mother had died. And it was Felicity, finally, who had returned to The Willows as a young woman of breath-taking beauty.

When Felicity had become engaged to Lindsay Townsend, a fair, languorous sportsman, Mattie had rejoiced. His family was wealthy, and it was understood that he would help John Gray with a loan in order to save their plantation. The loss of this loan after Felicity's death was only one of many disappointments for Mattie's father.

Although Mattie possessed many traits that her father valued highly—indeed, more highly even than beauty—the possibility of a brilliant marriage was ruled out. No, Gray would have to wait until perhaps one of the younger girls proved to have some extraordinary talents to attract beaux. And by then it might be too late, with the plantation irrevocably lost.

Mattie picked cotton furiously, puzzled at what had come over her during the last six months. Felicity was gone, and there was nobody to take her place. It was a fact all the Grays had accepted—all but Mattie.

After the sun had gone down, the Grays trooped back to the house to wash up for supper. But John Gray had not yet return-

ed from Chattanooga, and as the meal drew to a close Mattie began to worry about him. Seldom was her father so late in getting back from town. In truth, Mattie worried more and more about everything.

After supper a weary Mattie went out on the porch and fell into a rocking chair to await the return of her father. With a sudden aching clarity she saw the bleak future that was in store for her, and it made her shiver slightly in spite of the warmth of the night. She would stay at home caring for her young sisters and brothers—if they were lucky enough to keep the plantation going. If not, her father and brothers would have to seek paid work in the town.

Mattie never finished her thought, for just then she heard the thud of horses' hooves and the creaking of the old buckboard. Their father had returned.

Looking at her father surreptitiously, Mattie found her heart aching for him. Recent cares as well as his war wounds had made him look much older than his fifty years.

"Papa, what is it? Has—has something happened?" Mattie asked him, worried by his look.

"Mattie, sit you down, for we must have a talk."

"Yes, Papa," Mattie murmured, a shiver running through her. It was not like her father to be so grave. Had they lost the plantation, in spite of their two years of hard work?

"This has been a difficult time for all of us," John Gray said, finally breaking the silence. "You have been a great comfort to me, Mattie, a great comfort. I want you to know that. I don't know what the future holds in store for us. I can only hope for the best, and that the next few years will see a resurgence of the South, even if it must be a new South. The trouble is, my dear child, that a few years from now will be late for you."

Mattie caught her breath sharply, for she knew exactly what her father meant by his last words. He was thinking of her dim marriage prospects. Already twenty, Mattie was considered almost too old to be courted.

“Ethan fought in the war, became a captain. When he came back from the war he found his plantation a ruin...and his wife, Aurora, was dying.”

After some moments, John Gray spoke again. “Do you remember Ethan Talbot, Mattie?”

His question surprised her, for it seemed to be a complete change of subject. Mattie thought for some moments. “I don’t recall meeting the man, but doesn’t he own a plantation not too many miles from here? I think you and Mama used to know him.”

Her father nodded. “That’s right. He and his young wife came to the house once or twice some years ago. Ethan was just starting out then. He had inherited some of the best cotton land in Tennessee. Married him a lovely little belle, and they had a child. Ethan fought in the war, became a captain. A brave young man. When he came back from the war he found his plantation a ruin, completely burned down. And his wife, Aurora, was dying.”

“How terrible,” shuddered Mattie.

“Yes,” sighed John Gray. “It was not much of a homecoming. And so Ethan Talbot decided finally not to rebuild after all but to pull up stakes and go west, to start all over again.”

“That—that won’t be easy, will it,

Papa? The stories we’ve heard of people crossing the continent, the terrible hardships—”

“Yes, my child, but Ethan Talbot is still a young man, not yet thirty. And he has his little girl to think about.

“Ethan is in Kansas City right now, getting up an expedition to go out to California. He will lead the party himself. I—I had a letter from him this very day at the post office in Chattanooga. A very kind letter it was, Mattie. Ethan remembers our family well, and expressed his regrets for our troubles.”

Suddenly Mattie shivered, as a thought came into her head that was so incredible she didn’t dare dwell upon it. Surely Ethan Talbot had not asked her father—surely Papa wasn’t intending to—

“Ethan complimented me upon my daughters, and proposed an arrangement—that—that would be mutually beneficial. He needs—that is, his young daughter, Dinah, needs—a mother,” her father finally got out, “and Ethan is willing to—to take a bride without a dowry. I—I realize, Mattie, that it will be a hard life, especially at first, but I have decided to send you to be Ethan’s wife.”

No, it was impossible! Mattie felt her hands grow clammy, and she could scarcely catch her breath. Surely she hadn’t heard correctly. Surely it couldn’t be that her own beloved papa was contemplating giving her to a stranger as part of a “mutually beneficial” arrangement. An arranged marriage!

This was what her father was trying to tell her! He knew very well that nobody would choose Mattie, so he had done the very best thing he could think of for her. Ethan Talbot, a man close to thirty, a widower with a child needed a second wife. So her father was proposing sending Mattie to him, sight unseen.

“You are silent, my child, and I can

guess what you are thinking and feeling. But before you despair too greatly, let me just say that this proposition may turn out much better than you now imagine—”

“Did—did Mr. Talbot actually say in his letter that he wished to—to—marry—me?” Mattie whispered, her cheeks coloring at the very thought.

“He asked me to send my—my eldest daughter,” John Gray finally admitted softly.

With horrifying shock Mattie realized that Ethan Talbot wanted Felicity! Of course! Even if he had not seen Felicity for several years, she had always been beautiful. That was why Ethan Talbot was willing to accept a bride sight unseen.

“Papa, it is impossible,” Mattie cried. “Mr. Talbot wants Felicity, you know he does! I can’t, Papa, I just can’t. Imagine how disappointed and angry the man will be if he is expecting Felicity and finds only me!”

“Hush, hush, Mattie, you do yourself an injustice,” John Gray said softly. “He asked for my oldest, and that is you. You are to leave in two days. I shall drive you to Memphis, where you will meet up with the Wiler family. They’ll take you in their wagon to Kansas City. And now, my dear, I suggest you go to bed. Tomorrow you will pack your things—”

Mattie sighed deeply and surrendered. She knew for certain that there was no chance of his changing his mind.

Trying to control her despair and her trembling, Mattie drew herself up and reverted to her usual dignity. “Very well, Papa,” she murmured, reaching up to kiss his cheek.

That night as she lay in bed with wide-open eyes, too distraught to fall asleep, Mattie began to feel somewhat calmer. After all, she wasn’t wed yet. Perhaps she could find a way out. Perhaps she could come to an agreement with Ethan Talbot

in Kansas City. Once he saw she was not the daughter he had wished for, he might just agree to let her out of the bargain.

Mattie spent the following morning in Felicity’s room choosing things to take with her, feeling strangely guilty at violating the sanctity of her sister’s wardrobe. She stationed herself in front of the mirror and held up one of Felicity’s dresses, made of white calico with tiny blue flowers embroidered all over it. Peering earnestly into Felicity’s mirror, Mattie almost expected her own appearance to be miraculously altered.

No magic intervened, however, and Mattie saw her own plain reflection staring back at her. She saw a small, tawny face dominated by a pair of enormous eyes of a most unusual hazel brown with tiny flecks of gold. Her eyes were deep-seeing, searching, disturbingly intelligent, but they were not, Mattie well knew, the kind that turned men’s heads. Nor had she Felicity’s flaxen hair that fell in silky waves. Mattie’s hair was honey-colored and very thick, with a tendency to curl in an unruly fashion. She finished packing with a sigh, trying to resign herself to her plainness.

“Mr. Talbot has got a kind of sharp edge to him, as if he won’t let nobody get too close without him givin’ them a cut, before he gets cut himself.”

Mattie’s remaining time at The Willows passed all too quickly. Her heart nearly broke in two at having to kiss her family goodbye, knowing she would hardly recognize the younger ones when next she

saw them. But when Mattie and her father drove away from The Willows she was dry-eyed and resigned.

When Mattie and her father rode into Memphis she experienced a rising sense of excitement. She had been to this bustling city only twice before, and each time it had left her somewhat breathless and bewildered.

Just moments before they were to rendezvous with the Wiler family, John Gray took both his daughter's hands in his own. "I am glad to see, my dear Mattie, that you have resigned yourself to your situation. I have the greatest faith in your carrying out your duties as you have been taught. I am sure you will make us all proud of you. I think you may even find a measure of happiness."

A lump came to Mattie's throat and she was forced to lower her eyes guiltily.

If her father could read her thoughts, he gave her no indication. Instead he steered her past carriages and people hurrying to and fro, to a clearing near the blacksmith's shop, where a Conestoga wagon was waiting, the harnessed oxen pawing the ground restlessly. Mattie was greeted warmly by stocky, bearded Dan Wiler and his plump, pleasant wife, Tess. Their three sons made up the rest of their party.

Soon Mattie was positioned on the back ledge with the three Wiler boys, trying to take her mind off her sudden feeling of grief and loneliness as they began their journey to Kansas City.

During the late afternoon, Mattie took her turn at driving the wagon, Tess sitting next to her, while Dan and the boys had a nap in back. Mattie thought the other woman kept glancing at her as if she wished to say something. But as soon as Mattie looked expectantly in her direction, Tess would drop her eyes and remain mute.

Finally, Mattie broached the subject

herself. "Is there something you wish to tell me, Tess?" Mattie asked gently.

"Well—" Tess hesitated. "I'm not rightly sure, honey. I was just wonderin' if—if you ever met Mr. Talbot before."

"No—at least not that I can remember," Mattie hastily covered her confusion. "It appears I would have seen him when I was small. Why? Do you know him at all?"

"Oh, sure, honey, we met several times."

"I see," Mattie murmured. "Was Mrs. Talbot—was she very beautiful?"

"So I heard tell, honey, but I never seen her myself. Too sick she was to be havin' visitors. But it's a right snappy little daughter she has there," Tess added, after a moment's hesitation.

Mattie looked quickly at her. "Do you mean badly behaved?"

Tess suddenly avoided Mattie's eyes. "Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say so. Just sort of—strange like. Havin' her mother so ill and all, with her hardly knowin' her daddy because he was off to war. It can make a child act up some."

Mattie turned her head and looked at the other woman with a candid expression in her gold-flecked eyes. "Please tell me the whole truth, Tess. I'd like to know what to expect."

Tess sighed and looked at Mattie with compassion. "Well, when you put it that way—Mr. Talbot has got a kind of sharp edge to him, as if he won't let nobody get too close without givin' them a cut, before he gets cut himself. You understand what I mean?"

Mattie understood only too well. It made her more determined than ever to find a way to escape from a marriage which, if kindly and honestly Tess was to be believed, would be a disaster.

Finally they reached the town. Along the main street they went, slowly, impeded by

human, animal, and vehicular traffic. With her hands shading her eyes, Mattie peered ahead as far into the distance as she could. As a cloud of dust cleared she saw a cluster of covered wagons looming up before them.

Suddenly a small figure darted in front of the wagon and sped across the road; missing the oxen by only inches. Swearing under his breath, Dan reined in the animals, muttering, "Doggone wild kid."

Mattie, gazing after the child in horror, saw the little girl straighten up and tug on the hand of a man standing with his back to the road. He turned around and moved forward, holding the child's hand.

Mattie found herself staring at the small girl with tousled dark hair and impudent blue eyes and at the powerfully built dark man whose glowering looks weren't any more friendly than the child's.

Mattie knew who they were, even before she heard Dan say to her, "That's them. That's the Talbots."

"Howdy, Mr. Talbot," Dan called out jovially to the unsmiling man. Helping Mattie down from the wagon, Dan introduced them.

"How do you do, Mr. Talbot," said Mattie softly, her throat feeling tight.

"Well enough, Miss Gray," Ethan Talbot said after a moment's pause. His voice was deep and smooth, but the way he looked at her caused an icy shiver to work its way down the length of her spine. His cold blue eyes were as angry as a stormy sky, and he compressed his lips as if to prevent himself from saying something dreadful to her.

Turning her attention to the child, Mattie forced a smile to her lips. "Hello, Dinah."

The girl regarded her with the same eyes as her father and remained silent.

Without a word, Ethan Talbot strode

to the Wiler wagon, looking for Mattie's trunk.

In spite of her embarrassment, she quickly followed him. She wanted to tell him not to bother shifting her trunk to his wagon until she had had a chance to speak to him.

"This it?" he barked at her.

"Yes, but before you—"

"Please, Miss Gray, stand aside," he commanded, just as if he'd been speaking to a servant.

"I do not wish to marry you, Mr. Talbot," Mattie finally choked out stiffly.

Mattie blanched at his tone. Nobody had ever spoken to her in such a way before. His icy dismissal piqued her courage. "Before you move my trunk I should like to have a word with you," Mattie said.

Ethan Talbot whirled and glared at her with such loathing that she stopped in fright, feeling the color drain from her face.

"I have no time, at the moment, Miss Gray, to discuss anything whatever. We should have left this town more than one week ago. The delay may well prove fatal."

So saying, he grasped her trunk by the handles and wrenched it off the Wiler wagon with such ferociousness that for a moment Mattie feared it would fall to the ground and splinter into fragments.

Then he turned back to Mattie. "Come now, Miss Gray, the preacher is waiting." Without giving her an opportunity to say a word Ethan took her roughly by the elbow and half-pushed her towards a group of houses on the dusty street. "You

come too, Dan and Tess," he called out. "I suppose we'll need a couple of witnesses."

Appalled, Mattie hung back for a moment. "Surely, Mr. Talbot, you aren't meaning to—to—just at this moment—"

Gripping her elbow so fiercely that she felt a sting of pain, Talbot spoke without looking at her, nor breaking his stride. "Miss Gray, I am afraid there is no time for the gracious niceties of the old plantation," he spat at her. "It is necessary to get moving immediately. Since there will be no preacher for many miles we must get the ceremony over with while we can."

Feeling crushed, Mattie dabbed impatiently at the hot tears that began to gather in the corners of her eyes. This was no time to fall to pieces, she sternly told herself.

"I—I do not wish to marry you, Mr. Talbot," Mattie finally choked out stiffly, looking at him sideways.

Not only did he not stop and hear her out, but Ethan Talbot actually snorted as he guided her as firmly as before. "We cannot always have what we wish, I do assure you, Miss Gray."

When they arrived at the preacher's house, Talbot glanced coldly at the reluctant Mattie. "Miss Gray, stand by me," he commanded.

Mattie could see that he was wedding her in such indecent haste because she repelled him and he wished to do quickly what he loathed to do at all.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the preacher concluded.

When Ethan Talbot bent to kiss her, Mattie thought her loudly thudding heart would burst. His lips on hers for the briefest moment felt as cold as a pane of glass in winter.

The preacher and his wife offered their best wishes, and almost immediately the

wedding party was out of the door and hurrying back to their wagons.

"Dinah! In the wagon now, we're ready to go. All right, everyone! Jack! Where the devil is the fellow?" Ethan Talbot shouted. "Jack Bridger!"

The name was repeated down the wagon train, and in the next moment Mattie saw a man riding slowly towards them. He was dressed in buckskins and had a pistol in his belt, as well as a rifle slung through his saddle.

"We're ready to go, Jack," his master told him sharply.

Jack Bridger gave Ethan Talbot a mock salute as he guided his horse in front of the Talbot wagon. "All right, folks, move out!" the guide drawled in a voice that carried the length of the wagon train.

Mattie sat by Ethan Talbot like a statue, her unseeing eyes riveted in midair. It seemed to Mattie that they rode for several hours, and during that time Ethan Talbot did not say one word to her. Nor was there a sound from Dinah, who was riding inside the wagon.

After a while Mattie's neck grew stiff from being held in a rigid frontal position. She eased her head slightly from side to side. When she turned to her right she took a moment to glance at her new husband. Her husband! The word was like an insult dashed in her face.

Mattie regarded him objectively, noting the way his dark curls clustered around his temples and ears under his battered felt hat. His profile seemed carved of stone, the nose long and straight, the lips grim, the chin and jaw strong and well molded. Ethan Talbot was moderately tall and strongly built, with broad shoulders and powerful arms.

Ethan, feeling her gaze said, "I apologize for my peremptory behavior in Kansas City. It was not, I assure you, merely capriciousness on my part. The fact re-

mains, Miss—Mrs. Talbot, that the lives of everyone in this wagon train may depend upon our reaching the Sierra Nevada before the snows come. This week that we have been delayed may make the fatal difference. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Talbot, indeed I do, and I would not wish to be the impediment to a safe journey. It’s just—just that—that this arrangement into which you entered with my father, without my total agreement—”

“Ah, permit me to interrupt you, Mrs. Talbot, to say that it is utterly pointless to discuss what might have been. I am not deaf, ma’am. I heard you quite clearly when you said you did not wish to marry me. Nevertheless you have done so. Any speculating is useless now.”

“Very well, Mr. Talbot, if you tell me what is expected of me I will do my best to adhere to your wishes.”

“Agreed. First,” he said, looking at her again, and unable to keep the resentment from his expression, “I caution you to do your utmost to build up your strength. Frankly, ma’am, I can hardly credit that you have the physical stamina to complete the distance, and I wonder at the desperate plight of your father to have agreed to send you on such an arduous journey.”

Mattie said evenly, “I am not quite so fragile as I appear.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I am sure you will consent to do your share. You do not strike me as frivolous,” he allowed, his tone of voice causing her to redden once more.

“And what of—of Dinah?” Mattie asked him softly. “Am I to—to supervise her activities as if she—as if she were—I mean, is she to be in my charge—”

“Certainly,” said Ethan Talbot firmly: “She is a stubborn child, often lacking in discipline and propriety. I have not had much time for her during the past year and her old nurse spoiled her shamefully,

I am afraid. Nevertheless she will have to learn to do her share like anyone else. Dinah!” Ethan suddenly turned his head towards the wagon. “Dinah, come here, child.”

“What?” came the child’s resentful acknowledgement to her father.

“You are to mind Mrs. Talbot in the future, hear?”

“I won’t!” Dinah shouted defiantly. “I don’t want a new mama. My mama is dead and *she* can’t take her place! Never, never, never!”

Several times during the course of the journey that first day, Jack Bridger rode up to the wagon and consulted with Ethan Talbot regarding the route. From the conversation Mattie gathered that Jack, although young, was an experienced scout who had made this perilous trip several times. He was a lean Westerner with straight sandy hair and faded blue eyes. Mattie could see from the way he looked at her, that he had a liking for the ladies and was accustomed to having his affections returned.

By the time they stopped in the evening to make camp Mattie could have wept from exhaustion. While Ethan went off to confer with the men of the party, Tess Wiler took charge of Mattie, showing her how to build a fire and prepare the meal.

Tess introduced her to the other women in the wagon train, but one of them, named Jane Schapp, looked familiar to Mattie. Jane was one of the upperclass women in the party, and Mattie realized with a shock that she had been one of Felicity’s classmates. Mattie turned away quickly from the woman’s piercing gaze.

“Don’t worry, honey,” Tess whispered to Mattie when she saw her sad face. “Things have a way of changin’ for the better.”

Mattie impulsively gave the older

woman a hug, causing Tess's kindly, motherly eyes to light up at the spontaneous gesture. That day a bond formed between the two women that was to make Mattie's lot an easier one.

That evening Ethan Talbot called a meeting around the fire of all the travelers. "As we embark upon this journey we must take into account all the likely hazards ahead of us and be ready to act as one man when faced with danger. At such moments, unquestioning obedience is vital."

As Ethan spoke, in a firm, authoritative voice, Mattie saw that he was a natural leader, used to commanding and to being obeyed. Even the somewhat sinister Jack Bridger took his orders from Ethan. It was Jack's business to scout and report back to Ethan.

"Dinah, it is time for bed," Mattie told the little girl softly.

"I'm not going. I'm not sleepy. I always stay up with Papa," Dinah said shrilly, defying Mattie. Then she ran away from the wagon.

Mattie collared the child and half dragged her, screaming and protesting, back to the wagon. "Your father has bid you obey me, and that you will have to do," Mattie told the child firmly.

Mattie saw Ethan's face break into the most dazzling smile. It so transformed his features that she was momentarily stunned.

"You're not my mama! My mama is dead! I don't want another mama!" wailed the child.

Mattie's generous heart suddenly filled with pity. "I know, Dinah, and I'm sorry.

I won't try to take your mama's place. I want only to be your friend."

"I don't want to be your friend, I hate you—"

"Dinah!" Ethan's strong voice came from behind Mattie unexpectedly, making her jump. "You will mind Mattie, just as she has said."

Mattie's face felt hot and flushed that night as she thought of the ordeal ahead of her as Ethan's wife. Before leaving The Willows Esther had spoken gently to Mattie about being married. As Mattie had grown pale and quiet, dear Esther had rocked her in her arms as she used to when Mattie was a child.

Now, crouching on the back ledge of the wagon, Mattie didn't quite know what to do. She was a married woman, and the very thought of her "wifely duty" made her tremble with apprehension. It would have been different if she had loved her new husband, and he her.

Just then Ethan turned and came towards the wagon, stopping short as he saw her seated on the ledge.

"I—I thought you had already retired, ma'am," Ethan said softly, his eyes regarding her curly hair falling to her shoulders, the elegant dressing gown clinging very closely to her slender form, and her enormous golden eyes gleaming in the moonlight.

Then without warning he jumped up on the ledge and disappeared into the wagon. Was Mattie expected to follow him?

Just as she steeled herself to do so, he reappeared with a blanket roll. Jumping down from the wagon, he knelt and arranged the blanket as a bed on the ground.

"I'm taking the first watch tonight," Ethan said in a low, gruff voice, breaking the silence. He straightened up and, avoiding her eyes, said, "I will sleep out here. You will lie down in the wagon next to Dinah. Good night."

With that he was gone.

For a few moments Mattie lay staring up at the top of the wagon, the white canvas looking ghostly as some of the moonlight filtered through its coarse weave. Mattie felt as if she'd been dealt a physical blow. Ethan depised her so much that he was not going to avail himself of the privileges of a husband!

Mattie felt torn between relief and sorrow: relief because she had been terrified, and because she had scant liking for her new husband; sorrow because he found her so unattractive that he wanted to avoid her. Mattie felt hot tears trickle out of her eyes and slide down her cheeks. Undoubtedly Ethan still adored his beautiful first wife, Aurora. He had married only for convenience. And yet—and yet—would he have found it as easy to spurn Felicity as he did Mattie?

During the first few days on the trail Mattie found herself settling into a routine. Although she rose early, Ethan was always up before her and already stoking the breakfast fire. He would grunt a good morning and carry on with his work, scarcely casting an eye in her direction.

Several times during those first days Dinah eventually made her way to the back ledge of the wagon where Mattie had left a child's primer, hoping that Dinah would look at it.

The first couple of times she did so Dinah looked at the book with suspicion. Finally, though, her curiosity got the better of her and she gingerly touched the book with her fingertips.

Although Mattie was watching the child from the corner of her eye, she said nothing but went on reading her own book. Soon Dinah had opened her volume and was looking eagerly at the pictures.

From the intensity with which Dinah

poured over the text, Mattie could see that the child was intelligent and curious. If she showed an interest in learning how to read, Mattie was determined to teach her and thereby, perhaps, overcome her hostility.

One day, when Mattie and Dinah were both on the back ledge, Dinah thumping the pages of her book restlessly, an audible sigh escaped her lips every so often.

Although Mattie heard the girl she didn't raise her head from her own book.

"What does it say?" Dinah suddenly asked querulously.

Slowly Mattie began to read. The girl listened with rapt attention, asking Mattie to begin at the very beginning. Dinah made no interruption until Mattie had come to the end.

Then came a flow of questions, first about the story, then about the letters themselves. "This word has more letters than that word. Why is that?" Dinah wanted to know.

Mattie was elated. She had found Dinah by far the quickest child she had ever tried to teach. The little girl fairly soaked up everything Mattie said.

When they made camp for the evening, Dinah jumped off her seat. "Papa, Papa," she shouted, rushing to the front of the wagon clutching the book in her hand. "I can read."

Mattie saw Ethan's face break into the most dazzling smile. It so transformed his features that she was momentarily stunned. His teeth were very white against the darkness of his skin, and the smile indicated to her what she had begun to doubt: Ethan's capacity to feel joy. In his beaming expression, the blue eyes sparkling instead of glowering, Mattie saw vestiges of the charming Southern gentleman he must once have been, before the war and his wife's death had turned him so bitter.

Sighing, Mattie bent to the cooking. A buffalo had been shot that morning and the meat divided up among the travelers. Mattie was stirring the stew when she felt a slight tremor through her body. Turning, she saw Ethan standing some distance from the fire, his eyes upon her.

He slowly walked up to her, sniffing appreciatively. "It smells fine."

Coloring at the unexpected compliment, Mattie murmured her thanks. "I hope it will taste all right," she finished.

"It will be excellent as always," he said, dropping his gaze as he lit his pipe. "I wouldn't have thought that cooking in this helter-skelter way would have been one of the skills taught to a belle in Memphis," Ethan remarked.

Mattie felt her cheeks flushing painfully. She longed to confess that she had never been to school at Memphis, that she was not Felicity.

Mattie covered her confusion by stirring the stew again. "I—I learned to do chores at the plantation." Mattie heard herself chattering on, suddenly unable to stop, once she had begun. She spoke about her sisters and brothers, the work in the fields, the poor health and despair of her father.

While she talked, Ethan stood with his legs apart, smoking, observing her, the expression in his blue eyes neither hostile nor approving, but an enigma to Mattie.

Immediately after supper great angry clouds began to gather overhead. There was going to be a storm. The women began to clean up the plates, the boys to see to the animals, and the men to try to make the wagons secure.

Just as Mattie was kneeling at the river cleaning the pot, the wind started to blow up. She had forgotten her bonnet, and now her hair was blown all over her head in a tangle of honey-colored curls.

"Fixin' to be a storm, I reckon," came

Jack Bridger's voice at her elbow.

Mattie didn't know how long he'd been watching her, but she felt most uncomfortable under his gaze. "Yes, that is obvious," she said curtly.

"You sure get on your high horse, Miz Talbot. Why, you're even more stuck-up than that there Mrs. Schapp." Jack chuckled unpleasantly.

"I have never encountered such presumption and rudeness," Mattie said in a chilling voice, drawing herself up tall and speaking in her best Southern lady's manner to intimidate him. "I do believe I have given you no call to address me in such a manner. As a married woman—"

"That's a smart girl," he praised her. "But your sister, Felicity, she was the one who went to school in Memphis. . . ."

"Ha, ha," Jack suddenly interrupted, laughing with infuriating insolence. "Not so's anyone'd notice. Looks to me, ma'am, like the shine came off of that there marriage a long time ago. You're the second missus, ain't you? Dinah's real ma was a reg'lar beauty, so I hear tell—"

Her face crimson with fury, Mattie stalked away from the river. He was the most unpleasant man she had ever encountered. Why, back home if anybody had spoken to a lady as he had to her just now. . . .

Mattie's encounter with Jack had quite spoiled her mood and upset her even more than she wished to acknowledge.

During the next few days it was obvious to Mattie that Ethan had changed

towards her. The brief light had gone out of his eyes and he spoke to her of routine matters with cool respect, and nothing more. And Mattie's relationship with Dinah seemed to have reached a plateau. The child tolerated her stepmother, and more or less obeyed her. However, any small attempt on Mattie's part to get closer was met with a rude rebuff. Dinah would fasten her dark blue eyes upon Mattie with the same expression of resentment held by her father.

Instead of riding in the wagons, the travelers walked in order to save the strength of the mules and oxen. Mile after mile Mattie plodded on, holding to the reins of the oxen on one side, while Ethan strode parallel to her on the other side.

"We can't be very far from the river now," Mattie was saying, in an effort to cheer up the gloomy occupants of the wagons.

"That's it, Mattie, let's look on the bright side," Tess Wiler said, rising to her feet and accompanying Mattie on her rounds. "Shucks, we've come this far. We're not goin' to give up yet."

When they reached their destination Mattie used the very last of her strength to stagger to the river, downstream a bit from the others, pull off her clothes, and plunge into the cooling water. She washed her hair and every inch of her skin with the bar of soap she had brought, finally emerging clean and refreshed.

Putting on her clean clothes, Mattie felt better than she could have dreamed, for the water had rejuvenated her. As she headed for the wagons a tall figure loomed ahead of her, blocking her path. It was Jack Bridger, his form unmistakable in the moonlight.

"Well, now, if it ain't my favorite missus," Jack drawled, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "Been dunkin yourself in the river, have you? Now, ma'am, if you

had waited just a bit you and me could have had a right cozy little splash for ourselves. How about you waitin' here for me to get as fresh and sweet as you, and then I'll tell you somethin'. Yes ma'am, I got a real nice little surprise for you."

Grinning at her impudently, Jack took off his battered dusty felt hat, his buckskin jacket, and his perspiration-encrusted shirt, leaving his narrow, lean chest bare. He began to remove his trousers.

"Won't be a moment, sugar," laughed Jack.

The next moment she heard a loud splash. Breathing deeply with relief, Mattie hurried along the path towards camp.

"Hold on there!" Jack called angrily from the water. "You got no call to go runnin' off like that when I told you I wanted to talk to you. Might be if you don't care to listen, that there husband of yours will."

Something in Jack's tone of voice made Mattie hesitate and stop.

"That's a smart girl," he praised her. "But your sister, Felicity, she was the one who went to school in Memphis, ain't that right? Me and one of the ladies here have gotten right close and she told me she went to school with the oldest daughter of your family—says she had blue eyes and blonde hair—didn't look nothing like you."

Mattie began to sway as a tremor shook her slim form. So Jane Schapp had told Jack! Mattie was aghast, for if she asked for Jack's silence, he in turn would want—would demand—

"Oh, don't you worry none, ma'am. I aim to keep your little secret, sure enough. Just as long as you'll be real friendly."

Suddenly Jack reached out and grabbed her, his bony, eager fingers pawing over her as if he couldn't wait to exact his price for her silence.

"No, please! Not now! Goodness, I—I have to get my bearings!" Mattie suddenly found herself falling back on Southern archness. "I'm fairly about to collapse, Mr. Bridger. After such a hard day—"

"Sure, Miz Talbot, sure thing. I understand what you mean," snickered Jack. "I'll wait."

His evil laugh floated after her as she scurried back to camp wishing she were dead.

Without a word, Jack lunged for her. Totally stunned by his quickness, Mattie was taken completely by surprise.

Mattie returned to the wagon in such a furious temper that even Dinah noticed it. "What are you so mad for?" the child questioned her. "You remind me of Mama sometimes, when Uncle Bart was going away," Dinah continued, a frown wrinkling her small brow.

"Who was Uncle Bart?" Mattie asked.

Dinah shrugged. "My uncle. Mama liked him real well. But then he went away," she finished vaguely, "and Mama got sick and died."

"Come on, Dinah," Mattie said kindly. "We still have some molasses left. Let's make up a pot of fudge."

It was when the two were pouring the fudge onto a slab of rock to cool that Tess Wiler came rushing over to the fire.

"Quick, Mattie, could you possibly see to Meg Betts? I'm afraid her time has come real sudden."

"Of course," Mattie said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Wait here, Dinah, and watch the fudge."

Mattie hurried after Tess to the Betts

wagon, where Meg was giving birth. In truth, Mattie knew little about delivering babies, but she did have some knowledge of remedies and healing. The Willows, in the old days, had always had a good supply of medicines, and Esther had taught Mattie wonderful secrets about herbal remedies.

Mattie crouched in the wagon while poor Meg strained and perspired in her labors.

The sun had long set when a weary Mattie clambered down from the Betts wagon to tell the nervous Mr. Betts that he had a healthy son. A celebration was organized spontaneously. The fiddler played most beguilingly, and a harmonica wove a lively accompaniment.

Although she was tired, Mattie had promised to be at the party. Too weary to bother with her appearance, Mattie kept on her old calico dress, her hair pinned back carelessly. It had been some time since Mattie had taken any pleasure in her appearance. Perhaps if she looked as plain as possible Jack Bridger would lose interest in her.

As she prepared to join the celebrating travelers, Mattie was confronted by Ethan, his lighted pipe in his mouth.

"It was good of you to lend a hand to Meg," Ethan said softly, his glowing eyes fixed upon Mattie in such a way that she grew acutely uncomfortable under his gaze. It was seldom that Ethan praised her.

"Are you—are you coming to the celebration?" Mattie asked swiftly in a quaking voice, deliberately changing the subject.

"No, you go along and enjoy yourself. I—I don't much like—parties," Ethan said morosely, as if some unpleasant memory had crossed his mind.

Gratefully Mattie escaped to the center of the merriment. The elated new father was freely dispensing his store of whiskey

carefully transported for just this happy occasion. The celebrants were already flushed and bright of eye from their unaccustomed indulgence.

"Mrs. Talbot, I claim the first dance," Betts said happily. Mattie smiled and consented.

She had not planned to remain long, especially as she still felt tired and out of sorts. Moreover, when she was not wearing one of Felicity's frocks, and her hair was not brushed as smooth as she could make it, Mattie always felt painfully self-conscious and unattractive.

As soon as she could, she bid the others good night and began to walk back to her own wagon.

"Hold on there, Miz Talbot," Jack Bridger's voice suddenly called to her in the darkness. "You ain't a-gonna go away without even one dance for old Jack."

Mattie recoiled in fear and disgust. Jack obviously had been drinking. "It is late, Mr. Bridger. The dancing is almost over—"

Without a word, Jack lunged for her. Totally stunned by his quickness, Mattie was taken completely by surprise. No man had ever grabbed her like this before.

The more she struggled, the more relentlessly Jack embraced and kissed her. He began to whisper into her ear.

His horrible words shocked Mattie and she stopped struggling for a moment. As she did, Jack loosened his grip.

The next second, Mattie, exerting her strength to the utmost, pushed him away. As she did so she saw Ethan coming towards them but still some distance away.

"You stop, Jack," she hissed, as he came towards her again and tried to embrace her. "There's my husband!"

Even as she spoke, Mattie saw Ethan stop for a moment, observe them, and

whirl on his heel and stomp away.

Jack also saw Ethan retreating. The scout laughed nastily. "Shucks, he ain't even mad. No, ma'am, I think he'd be real glad if I was to take you off of his back. Come here, you little wildcat—"

"Let go of me! You revolting man!" Mattie spat out.

"You're a wild one," Jack laughed. "I'll soon make you forget that sour hombre you married. He's got his heart took up with ghosts, and I'm a real live man wantin' only you," Jack whispered.

Mattie broke away from Jack, his evil insinuations ringing in her ears, and rushed after Ethan.

"Ethan! Ethan!" she cried. "Oh, where are you? Please, Ethan—"

"Shut up!" his voice hissed at her from the tall grass.

She whirled and groped towards him, for it was a dark, moonless night.

"I'm—I'm sorry. I want to explain about—about—"

"Save it!" he said, contemptuously. "Actions speak louder than words."

"But you don't understand," she cried. "He forced me—"

"Stop lying! I could see with my own eyes." Standing before her with his legs apart, Ethan clenched his fists. "I have been waiting for you to show your true colors, Mattie, and tonight you have. Oh, I've no doubt you are frightened at having been caught," Ethan said, narrowing his eyes coldly at the tears now stealing down her cheeks.

Swallowing them down hastily, Mattie fixed her wet-lashed golden eyes upon Ethan and choked out, "Jack Bridger is the very first man who has ever kissed me. I swear it!"

"Swearing comes easily to liars!"

"I'm—I'm not lying, I tell you."

"Do you dare to stand there and tell me you have never even been kissed?" hissed

Ethan in a fury.

Although Mattie feared Ethan meant to strike her, she looked him straight in the eye. "Yes, I do. He is the very first, in spite of the fact that—you're supposed to be my husband," she blurted out.

Perhaps all was not yet lost. If she survived the journey there was really nothing to prevent her from leaving Ethan when they arrived in California.

"Do I detect a note of dissatisfaction about our married life?" Ethan suddenly queried her, his voice dripping with mockery. "Did I not tell you at the outset that the marriage was a practical matter? Did I ever encourage you to think—"

"No! No, you didn't," Mattie hastily agreed. She now felt mortified that he should think that she actually *wished* him to—to behave like a husband.

She crept into the wagon and buried her face in her pillow, trying to stifle the tears and sobs that now racked her body and cried as if her heart would break. Then, finally, worn out with her misery, she fell into a deep sleep, only to awaken long before dawn, feeling calm and clear-headed.

Perhaps all was not yet lost. If she survived the journey there was really nothing to prevent her from leaving Ethan when they arrived in California. She now rebelled against remaining with a man who hated her.

Mattie hadn't really believed that the going could become more difficult, but it did. The party passed through such hot, dusty land that it was almost like desert.

The food shortage was alarming and it began to look as if water would also become a problem. Tempers were understandably short. Never had Mattie heard so many quarrels.

Mattie, of course, did her utmost to help where she could and to set a good example. In truth, she felt poorly much of the time. The shortage of food gave her severe headaches, not helped by the blinding heat and dust of the trail which further troubled her sensitive eyes.

Ethan's energy seemed propelled by sheer grit and determination to reach his destination with as few casualties as possible. As far as Mattie could tell, Ethan ate almost nothing and hardly drank his share of the water. He drove himself very hard, never resting, never relaxing.

On a day when it looked as if half the party was too weak from lack of nourishment to go on, Ethan, Jack, Carter Schapp, and Dan Wiler—the only men really fit to hunt—managed to kill a stray buffalo.

What cries of relief and triumph went up in the camp! Enthusiastically a large fire was lit and the meat put on a spit. Soon the smell of roasting was wafting cheerily through the camp.

Dinah had washed her hands and face and put on a clean dress, while Mattie, too, made herself as presentable as possible in honor of the occasion. A heady feeling of optimism overtook her. If a buffalo had been found just when the situation had seemed at its blackest, surely that was a good omen.

While waiting for the meat to cook, Mattie was instructing Dinah on the art of mending. To quell the child's grumbling, Mattie agreed to tell her a story. The two were totally absorbed and did not hear Ethan approaching. It was only when he said, "Dinah!" in an angry voice that they looked up.

"Have you been concealing food from me?" Ethan asked her, his voice barely under control.

Dinah's eyes widened in surprise. "No, Papa, I don't have anything—"

"Think, Dinah! Don't lie to me! You know I loathe deceit!" Ethan's blue eyes looked almost black with rage, and he reached out hands that were trembling with anger to grasp his daughter by the shoulders.

Dinah's eyes grew wide with terror. "I swear, Papa, I don't—"

Ethan suddenly slapped her across the face. Then he drew from his pocket a red bandana, tied in a knot. "Do you deny that this is yours?"

Dinah, stunned, had put her hand to her stinging cheek. All the color had gone out of her small face.

"Answer me! Isn't that yours?"

"I—I don't know. It could be. I have one like it but—"

With fingers shaking with rage, Ethan undid the knot and shook out the bandana. A cluster of nuts rolled to the ground. "You knew you were supposed to share every single morsel of food, regardless of what it was. And yet you deliberately tied up these nuts and withheld them!"

"I didn't!" the child cried, her eyes now sparkling with as much anger as her father's. "Those are not mine! I never saw them before."

"Indeed," sneered her father. "Do you claim that somebody has stolen your bandana?" As he spoke, Ethan advanced upon his daughter as if he intended to strike her again.

"Don't!" Mattie said impulsively, suddenly stepping in front of Dinah. "Please, I'm sure there is some explanation—"

Thrusting her rudely aside, Ethan tried to grab Dinah, but Mattie's intervention had given the child enough time to escape

from her father's ire.

Instead of going after her, Ethan turned his blazing eyes upon Mattie, who did not flinch from him. "I believe she is telling the truth," Mattie said firmly. "I'm sure there has been a mistake—"

Before Ethan could reply a great cry went up from the camp. The meal was cooked, and everyone began to crowd around the fire. For a moment it seemed to Mattie that Ethan was so enraged he would storm away and miss his meal.

However, he took a deep breath and stalked to the fire to supervise the division of the food.

Dinah hadn't fled very far. Mattie could see her hovering on the edges, wanting some food but not wishing to be grabbed by her father. Fixing a plate for Dinah, Mattie found her skulking miserably near the wagon. "Don't be upset, dear. I'm sure there has been some mistake."

"Come on, Miz Talbot, just one little kiss to show that you still remember old Jack, that you ain't forgot the bargain we made."

"I hate him!" Dinah declared, between hungry mouthfuls.

"Hush! That's not true. You're angry, and hurt, understandably, and so is he. He truly believes that you lied. But it will blow over, you'll see."

That evening after supper there was a noisy celebration. Only the Talbot family was subdued. Ethan disappeared immediately after the meal. Dinah, too, went straight back to the wagon and sulked. Mattie followed her, trying everything she

could think of to take the girl's mind off her troubles, but not succeeding.

It was a long time before she would consent to go to bed. Even then, Mattie had to sit with her, stroking her forehead, murmuring soothing words. It was only sheer exhaustion that finally allowed Dinah to fall asleep.

Mattie covered her gently. On an impulse, she took a hurried look through Dinah's things. It was with righteous jubilation that Mattie, her hand exploring a pile of dresses, came up with a rumpled red bandana, almost exactly like the one Ethan had been brandishing earlier. Carefully Mattie tucked it into her bodice.

Mattie decided to get a breath of air before retiring. Just as she was returning to go to bed she surprised Jack Bridger hovering near the wagon. "Well, now, Miz Talbot, it's been a long time since you and me had a cozy little chat. Yes'm, much too long. You been lookin' right peaked lately, but that bit of meat you ate tonight ought to do the trick. What do you say to a little cuddle?"

Mattie backed away fearfully, her pulse beginning to pound in her temple. "Please, Mr. Bridger, I—I'm not feeling at all well. The heat and the dust have been affecting my eyes—"

"Come on, Miz Talbot, just one little kiss to show that you still remember old Jack, that you ain't forgot the bargain we made. Remember Felicity," he said ominously.

Mattie swallowed, steeling herself to accept one small kiss. She held herself stiffly as Jack grabbed her and greedily sought her mouth. Twisting her head she avoided his lips, which only brushed her cheek. Feeling defiled nevertheless, Mattie squirmed from his grasp and fled across the clearing to her own wagon, leaving Jack chuckling evilly after her.

Mattie was so absorbed in her thoughts

that she bumped right into Ethan without seeing him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, backing off. "I—I'm sorry, I didn't see you standing there."

Ethan approached her angrily. "How dare you defy me in front of my own daughter? How dare you take her part against me?"

"I—it wasn't a question of taking anyone's part," Mattie whispered. "I could see that Dinah was telling the truth—"

"Ah, yes, of course! One liar covering up for another," Ethan growled, his dark blue eyes shooting daggers at her. "You are never, ever in the future to interfere between me and Dinah, do you understand?"

Mattie regarded him with an expression of irony. Then, reaching into her pocket she extended her own hand, with Dinah's bandana.

Ethan blinked for a moment. "What—where did you find that?"

"With Dinah's dress, the blue one with the pink flowers. She was wearing it only yesterday. This is her bandana. The one you have in your hand apparently belongs to someone else."

As the knowledge of what he had done hit Ethan, he wilted, hunching his shoulders, while he crumpled the bandana he was holding and thrust it into his pocket. Putting his hand over his eyes. Ethan leaned weakly against the wagon, overcome with remorse.

"I—I haven't been myself lately," he suddenly confessed, his voice breaking with emotion. He looked up at Mattie then, a contrite expression in his eyes. "How could you be so sure that Dinah was telling the truth?"

"Because she is an open child. Anyone could have seen that she was bewildered by your accusation. You would have seen

it yourself if you were not so unreasonably touchy and so unreasonably suspicious of everyone."

"Let's not go overboard about this thing," Ethan said coolly. "I may have made a mistake in this instance, but that doesn't mean that other suspicions aren't completely well founded."

"Oh, you are a bitter man," Mattie suddenly cried. "You have allowed your experiences to distort everything."

"That's enough, Mattie," Ethan said harshly. "You have said quite enough!"

"No, I have not!" cried Mattie defiantly. "I can understand the reasons for your bitterness. It must have been dreadful to lose a young and beautiful wife, and you must miss her dearly, but that is no reason to take it out on Dinah!"

A look passed over Ethan's face that Mattie couldn't immediately interpret. Part rage, part sadness, part hurt. Yet she stood her ground, her golden eyes flashing at him, her lips parted, while she caught her breath in small gasps.

Mattie was prepared for a blow. What she was not expecting was Ethan to grab her roughly and press her to him, to pull her head back by her hair, and assault her mouth with his own.

Stunned by the unexpected embrace, Mattie did not immediately resist. The next moment all thought of resistance had vanished, for Ethan's kisses made her feel as she never had before. Without quite understanding anything, Mattie yielded up her soft mouth to Ethan's while she twined her arms around his neck.

Breathing hoarsely, Ethan tugged at her hair, the pins falling out. He clutched her tangled curls with his fingers and held her head back, immobile, while he strained her even more closely to him and covered her mouth again and again with his frenzied kisses.

Never had Mattie felt such a sensation.

"You were kissing me in anger and male insistence, not because you have any feeling for me. Nor do I for you."

Flames appeared to dart through her, and she responded blindly and ardently to his kisses. When Jack Bridger had kissed her she had felt pure revulsion. But Ethan, oh, Ethan!

Frightened at what she was feeling, Mattie moaned softly, begging him to stop.

For a moment Ethan ignored her pleas, embracing her with savage intensity.

"Please, please, stop! I—I can't—not like this—" What she meant was that she wished for a tender response from him, an indication that he truly cared for her and not merely that he had been carried away because of his long abstinence—

With a sudden vicious movement Ethan flung her from him so that she fell to the ground. "Stop, shall I? That's just about what I might expect from such a treacherous woman as you! You'll deny me, your husband, what you so freely already have granted to Jack Bridger!"

"That's not true," cried Mattie hotly.

"Why else do you coyly tell me not to kiss you?"

"Just because you suddenly have the whim to behave like a husband doesn't mean I have no say in the matter! You have treated me disdainfully from the first moment, when you saw that I wasn't beautiful—"

Ethan snorted suddenly. "Is that what you think!"

"Yes, yes I do!" Mattie averred fiercely. "You were kissing me in anger and male—male insistence, not because you

have any—any feeling for me. Nor do I for you," she finished in a low voice, turning away.

Mattie's pride would not let her admit to Ethan that his kisses had brought her close to ecstasy.

"I shall trouble you no more," Ethan whispered hoarsely, whirling and striding away.

Mattie flung herself on her bed. She loved Ethan, she now knew, but she would never reveal it to him.

Each day through the tinder-dry prairies brought the party closer to thirst and starvation. It seemed as if every living creature had fled from the drought, and the men had no luck at all with their hunting. Every morsel of food and every drop of water the wagon train carried was strictly doled out.

The children suffered the most, for they could not understand why they were in such discomfort. Mattie took to doing with less food and water herself so that Dinah could have more.

One day, as Mattie was dividing the provisions for the family, she started guiltily as Ethan came up behind her unawares. "What do you think you're doing?" he asked her gruffly.

"I—I just thought that Dinah seemed so peaked and fretful that if she could have only a drop more—"

Ethan, gazing at Mattie fixedly, compressed his lips, while a muscle in her cheek fluttered slightly. "I appreciate the thought, Mattie," he said, "but you mustn't do that. You need your strength for the work. Dinah will be all right."

That day, when they were stopped for their mid-afternoon rest, somebody noticed fire in the distance behind them. With the men off hunting, a ripple of fear went through the party, for a prairie fire was one of the most dreaded perils of the

journey. Under such dry and hot conditions, the smallest breeze could spread a fire hundreds of miles within a very short time.

There was a sudden stillness in the air. The wind had stopped completely. As she glanced towards the east, Mattie was horrified to see that the fire was approaching rapidly. Suddenly the wind began to blow again, but this time from the east!

"Let's move out!" Mattie suddenly shouted, making a decision. "The fire is spreading! We must try to reach the river!" Her young, clear voice rang out calmly and authoritatively.

Glancing in the back of her wagon, Mattie was frightened to note that Dinah was not there. "Dinah!" Mattie cried, "Come back quickly, we're moving out!"

There was no answer, nor could Mattie see anything, as the increasing wind stirred up the dust. Terrified, Mattie began to run blindly in the direction of the fire, screaming Dinah's name into the wind.

Suddenly the dust cleared momentarily, and Mattie's eyes widened in horror. The wind had carried burning clumps of dry brush and scattered them all around. As each hit the ground it ignited the dry grass, and within moments great streaks of flames shot up towards the sky, along with billowing, dense smoke.

For a moment Mattie stood rooted to the ground. Then she rushed to her wagon and drew out two empty potato sacks. The back of the wagon held a barrel with the remains of the drinking water. Without hesitating, Mattie stepped into it, immersing herself completely. Then she flung the sacks into the water and dragged them out, dripping.

"Mattie, what are you doing?" screamed Tess Wiler. "You can't go back there, it's all ablaze!"

Without a moment's hesitation, Mattie

thrust herself through the sheet of fire, while Tess screamed in horror.

The smoke and heat were terrible. The wet sack against her face helped Mattie to breathe. "Dinah! Dinah! Dinah!" Mattie cried over and over again, straining her smarting eyes to see through the dense, billowing black smoke.

Mattie thought she heard a weak, strangled cry.

Dashing frantically towards the sound, Mattie dimly saw Dinah sitting on the ground, her face completely blackened. While she coughed, choking, from the fumes, her blue eyes were wide with shock.

Rushing up to her, Mattie yanked her to her feet, put the other wet sack over her, and threw Dinah over her shoulder.

Mattie went limp in his arms, accepting his kisses and tender embraces.

As soon as she was clear of the fire she flung Dinah and herself to the ground and rolled them round and round, to be sure no flames were burning the sacks. Miraculously, both sacks, although they were badly charred, had been wet enough to keep them from catching fire.

Tess Wiler had waited, petrified. Her face now lighting up with relief, she hurried forward to help Mattie put Dinah into the wagon. Not daring to slow down for an instant, Mattie and Tess used the last drop of their strength to urge the oxen forward at the fastest pace they could muster.

"I see it," Tess suddenly exclaimed, squinting into the distance. "There's the river! The others made it all right! Oh,

hurry, hurry," she moaned, as an increased gust of wind suddenly seemed to bring the fire closer to them.

As they came within sight of the river, the heat-crazed oxen suddenly bolted.

Most of the other wagons were already across the river. A great cheer broke out as the Talbot wagon came into view and the oxen splashed into the water.

Suddenly a great splashing in the water cleared and revealed Ethan on his horse, his face ashen. "Mattie, thank heaven!" he called out to her. "Dinah?"

"Safe in back," Mattie gasped. Suddenly she felt her head grow light. A dizziness overtook her and she fell into a swoon. Ethan's strong arms grabbed at her and prevented her from falling into the water.

When Mattie regained consciousness she found herself lying on a blanket on the ground. Ethan was crouched over her, gently wiping the soot from her face. "How do you feel? Are you all right now?" he asked her softly.

"Yes," Mattie whispered, although her eyes still burned and her throat felt raw.

"Is—is everyone safe?" Mattie now asked, trying to rise on one elbow. "And Dinah, is Dinah—"

"Hush, hush, Mattie," Ethan crooned, drawing her to his breast and cradling her in his arms. "Everyone is fine, thanks to you. I shall never forget your bravery, in risking your life to save Dinah." With those words, Ethan hugged her to him and bent his head to press his lips against her forehead.

Mattie went limp in his arms, accepting his kisses and tender embraces. Such a feeling of love for him shook her entire frame that she feared she might swoon once more, this time from happiness.

"My wonderful Mattie, the bravest woman in the world," Ethan breathed, as

he sought her lips once more.

A chilling thought struck Mattie then; making her tremble once again, but for a different reason. Ethan was embracing her out of gratitude! It wasn't love, merely relief and thanks!

Mattie pushed the palms of her hands against his chest and thrust him from her.

"What—what's the matter? Why do you—?"

"I—I have to get up," she murmured, rising shakily to her feet.

"But I have offended you! Why? Are you embarrassed? What you did was uncommonly courageous—"

"Not at all," Mattie said coldly. "Anyone else would have done the same."

Ethan, seeing Mattie's furious expression, mistakenly thought it was directed at him. "I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed icily. "I mustn't presume to take liberties with your person, when you have so clearly lost your heart, and the devil knows what else, to Jack Bridger!"

Ethan stalked away before Mattie could utter a sound. Oh, he was simply infuriating! How could a man as intelligent as Ethan be so entirely mistaken about her? Why, oh why couldn't he see that she didn't wish to be embraced out of gratitude? That she loved him so desperately that such loveless kisses as he bestowed upon her were far, far worse to her than none at all!

It was with a heavy heart that Mattie crept into the wagon that night, where Dinah was sleeping peacefully, the ravages of her experience gone from her face. Mattie marveled at how rapidly a child could recover from such an ordeal.

The child stirred, and moaned softly.

"Are you all right, Dinah?" Mattie called gently.

"Yes, Mama," Dinah whispered.

Mattie caught her breath. "It's Mattie

here," she corrected softly.

"I know, Mama," Dinah murmured, suddenly shifting over to Mattie's side and snuggling in her arms. In a moment she was asleep again.

The next morning Ethan addressed the travelers. "Before we leave tomorrow, I want each family to examine carefully what it has in the back of the wagon, and to leave behind here anything extra. I know how difficult it was for all of you to part with your most treasured possessions. Although we've come a bit more than halfway, the worst part of the route is yet before us. And we must not have one inch of space devoted to something not vital to survival, where we could instead carry food and water."

As he paused, the crowd began to buzz uncomfortably. Ethan looked at them with sympathy, but he could not budge from his position.

Then Ethan brought Jack forward. "Tell them, Jack, what the rest of the way is like," Ethan requested grimly.

While the emigrants mumbled uneasily, Jack addressed the company. "Mr. Talbot is sure tellin' you the honest truth. It's desert, folks, for the next forty miles. Why, if we don't stock up on every drop of water we can carry, the animals is gonna drop down dead. The alkali is a-gonna sting your eyes and throats, folks is gonna be took bad ill, or if they drink that awful stuff they go plumb out of their heads. If we all get across the Sink alive—menfolk, womenfolk, kids, and animals—this here is gonna be the first time."

There was a terrible, hushed silence. Even the children's eyes were round with fear.

They set off, the increasing heat previewing the discomforts to come. At the last place before setting out across the desert they filled every possible receptacle

with water. Ethan walked through the camp, ensuring that every wagon wheel was well greased, and axles and brakes were checked. Animals were groomed, watered, and fed.

The first few miles were the most ghastly of the entire trip thus far. Jack Bridger had not exaggerated his description of the desert. It seemed to be composed entirely of alkaline salt, giving off strong fumes as the white, ashy dust rose in stifling billows around the wagons plodding through the desert.

Mattie, a wet cloth across her face, drove the Talbot wagon, while Ethan kept to his horse, weaving in and out of the wagons, trying to encourage the despondent travelers to go as fast as possible. If they could make twenty miles each day, in two days they would be over the worst. Unfortunately, they could do no such thing. Several wagons broke down and had to be repaired. One collapsed into a pile of slats and nails.

At the end of the second day, Dinah, complaining bitterly of stinging eyes and burning lungs, went to lie down in the back of the wagon. Mattie gave her a drink of precious water, put a damp cloth on her head, and returned to drive the wagon.

By the evening of the second day several animals had perished and about half of the party had fallen ill, some only mildly, some seriously. To Mattie's enormous relief, however, Dinah was almost recovered.

Mattie concentrated upon boiling as much of the water as possible. As she puttered about, trying not to give in to her exhaustion, she noticed Ethan sitting on the ground with his arms around his knees, watching her.

Turning in his direction suddenly, Mattie surprised Ethan. His eyes glowed at her for a moment, and he shook his head with

wonderment. "I was just thinking that I predicted at the beginning of the journey that you would be too frail to survive the hardships. Now it appears that you're stronger than most of the others. I—I want to thank you, Mattie, for being so wonderful to Dinah. After her mother died I thought she'd never be happy again. It was as if the joy had gone forever, for she'd had too much to bear. But you've done wonders, Mattie. I'm very grateful."

Mattie averted her eyes, feeling her cheeks flush slightly. "There's nothing to thank me for," she murmured softly.

"Mattie," Ethan whispered, holding out his hands to her.

Too tired to think clearly, Mattie felt the blood race through her, as she went forward slowly as if in a trance. Was he calling her to him because he really wanted *her* or merely because she was a woman?

Ethan seemed different this time, more gentle. Shyly Mattie put her hands into his, and he held them for a moment, gazing at her with an expression of admiration. "I don't really understand you, Mattie. You are a wonderful woman, and yet—and yet—"

As he paused, Mattie flushed. She knew he was thinking of Jack Bridger, and she hesitated to defend herself once more, for whenever she did Ethan grew so unreasonably angry.

Ethan said nothing more. He drew Mattie close to him and enfolded her in his arms, pushing her bonnet back off her head, stroking her hair gently.

Mattie tried to hold herself aloof. It was gratitude, she kept telling herself, nothing more. She must control her impulse to fling her arms around him, and bury her head against his chest. If she let herself go she would only feel worse when she realized, for the hundredth time, that it was not love

that he felt for her.

"Mattie," Ethan breathed, tilting up her chin with his hand and lightly kissing her lips.

Still she held back, not daring to respond. His hands suddenly gripped her back convulsively and he kissed her with abandon. Quickly, dangerously, she felt her control weakening. Oh, how she loved him, how she longed to surrender herself to him! But she didn't dare, she mustn't, the disappointment would kill her.

Suddenly Ethan let out a cry. Thrusting her from him, he doubled over. He backed up against the wagon, leaning over, both hands holding his stomach.

Terrified, Mattie drew closer. She knew, with a sinking feeling, that Ethan was exhibiting the first symptoms of the desert illness. "Let me help you," she cried, putting her arms around him.

Gritting his teeth with pain, Ethan leaned heavily upon her, while she puffed and strained to help him into the wagon.

When she finally got him to the bed, she knelt solicitously at his side, undoing his vest and shirt and mopping his face, brow, and chest with a cool, damp cloth.

"Mattie, Mattie," he moaned softly, tossing his head from side to side. "I can't be ill, not now. I—I must get up—" He attempted to struggle into a sitting position.

Under Mattie's soothing, Ethan finally lay back once more, his breath coming in gasps, and his eyes glazing over with fever. "Mattie," he whispered, barely able to speak, as the illness sapped his strength. "Come closer and listen carefully. You must take over the wagon train. You must lead us out of here tomorrow."

Mattie was stunned with apprehension. "But I couldn't. Who will listen to me?"

"You can. You must. You are strong, Mattie, and everyone respects you. You must lead them, just as you did to escape the prairie fire. They will do as you say.

Fetch Jack here, and Dan Wiler," Ethan gasped, his face growing ashen with pain.

Hastily Mattie flew from the wagon, dashing the tears from her eyelids. In spite of her worry, she was careful to collect Dan before approaching Jack. Then the three of them hurried to the Talbot wagon.

"Mattie is now in charge," Ethan whispered, and then he lost consciousness.

"Jack Bridger, I have had all I'm going to take from you. If you ever make such a suggestion again. . . I swear that I will shoot you dead."

To her surprise, not one soul objected. Mattie shyly realized that she did, indeed, enjoy the respect of the others. Everyone remembered her clear thinking and courage in leading the wagons of women and children away from the fire. In addition, Tess had told all the women, who in turn told their husbands, how Mattie had risked her life to save Dinah from certain death.

When Mattie finally dragged herself back to the wagon she found that Ethan was no longer unconscious, but that he was tossing and mumbling in delirium. While she bathed his forehead, she tried to comprehend what he was saying, but his speech was unclear.

All night Mattie remained by his side, dozing fitfully and awakening every time Ethan awoke. At one point in the night he recognized her, by the dim light of the lamp she had left burning.

"Mattie, oh, Mattie, if only you wanted me, and only me," he suddenly

called out, his burning eyes upon her face reproachfully.

"But I do," she cried then, bending over his tortured face. "I do, Ethan, you and nobody else, forever!"

Had he heard? Had he understood? His eyes were staring now, and Mattie saw that he was once again delirious.

Mattie was ready early the next morning to move out the wagon train. First she made the rounds, as Ethan generally did, to ascertain how many were sick, how many recovered.

Ethan was now sleeping, though restlessly. Leaving Dinah to watch for any change in her father's condition, Mattie took her seat in the front of the wagon and led the procession forward.

After they had plodded on for some hours, the sun scorching the white tops relentlessly, the acrid dust choking the travelers, Jack came riding up to Mattie.

"Reckon we can stop for lunch now," Jack said to her.

"Very well," Mattie said, not looking at him. "Will you please call a halt? My—my voice is failing," she whispered.

"Sure thing, ma'am," Jack's drawl carried to the very last wagon.

As Mattie was about to alight from the wagon, she noticed that Jack was still alongside her, sitting tall and unruffled in the saddle.

"You and me seem to be holdin' up pretty good, ma'am. How's about we take off for a little bit of fun?"

Jack stopped short as Mattie, without a word, coolly pointed a pistol right at his heart. Her eyes narrowed, an expression of grim determination on her face, she finally said, "Jack Bridger, I have had all I'm going to take from you. If you ever make such a suggestion again, if you ever touch me or in any way presume to compromise me again, I swear that I will shoot you dead."

As she spoke, she held the gun steady. Something in her voice and expression at long last got to Jack Bridger. He sat on his horse without moving, looking at her intently through his faded eyes. He was no longer smirking.

"I reckon you're plumb crazy about the boss man, ain't you?"

"That is none of your concern. Mr. Talbot has left me in charge here, and I intend to see to it that I fulfill my responsibility. I'm asking you, Mr. Bridger, to help me."

Jack moved his hand to his hat in a salute. "I got you, Miz Talbot," he said, and then he rode off.

Mattie sighed and put the pistol away. She didn't truly trust Jack not to bother her in the future, but she felt that she had convinced him to let her alone for the time being.

That evening, as Mattie crept into the wagon with a bowl of soup for Ethan, she found him nearly recovered. His fever was gone, and he was himself once again.

He smiled weakly at Mattie. "I knew you could do it. You have the stuff, Mattie, of which pioneers are made. I was wrong in ever having doubted you." Suddenly a shadow crossed his face, and the reproachful look was once again in his eyes. Evidently he had no memory of what Mattie had told him the previous night.

The next morning, when Jack Bridger proclaimed that Virginia City lay below them, the travelers let out an enormous shout of joy. Tumbling out of their wagons, men, women, and children raced to the edge of the summit and looked out upon the vista. There, some miles below them, nestled the cluster of buildings in the valley that was called Virginia City.

"Easy, easy," Ethan cautioned, smiling at his followers. "Save your strength,

folks. The worst is over, but there's still a way to go."

They arranged to remain for a few days camped on the outskirts of the city, to recuperate, repair their wagons, rest the animals, and generally have a good time. It was decided that they would hold a celebration ball at the Hotel Virginia, and Ethan took Mattie to the suite he had rented for them to prepare for the party.

"Is something troubling you, Mattie?" Ethan asked her guardedly, as Dinah, in great excitement, began to lay out her party clothes.

"I—I was thinking of my father, my family," Mattie whispered, coloring.

"They're having a very hard time, I know," Ethan said sympathetically.

His unexpected understanding suddenly drew the tears to Mattie's eyes. "Oh, goodness, yes! I'm—I'm so worried about Papa—" she broke off, distressed.

Ethan looked at Mattie steadily. "As soon as we're settled we can send for the whole family. That is—if—if you wish."

Mattie turned away so that he would not see her tears. Did he sense that she intended to leave him? Was he giving her the option of remaining? Did he want her, or was he doing his best to live up to the bargain he had made with her father?

Mattie had not known that Ethan had the means to send for her family. Now if she decided to annul the marriage it would affect her dear family, so it was not a decision for herself alone. And yet, how could she consent to spend the rest of her life with a man who, though he might do his duty, still mourned his first love?

As she prepared for the ball, she thought how wonderful it felt to have a real bath once more, to sit in the tub and let the soapy water run luxuriously over her limbs. Then she brushed her hair until it was dry, and for once it fell the way she wished.

Among the dresses Mattie had taken with her was an elegant taffeta of burnt orange, the color of leaves on an autumn day. It had almost no sleeves and was cut quite low in back and front.

Trembling at her temerity, Mattie donned the dress just to see if, perhaps, it didn't look too bad after all. The sight that met her eyes in front of the full-length mirror was pleasing. Somehow, during the months of their journey, her figure had filled out to womanly proportions in just the right places.

When she entered the ballroom Mattie found the party in full swing. It was wonderful to see the changes that had been wrought in the weary, rumpled travelers. Many of them, especially the women, were hardly recognizable. But then, as an excited murmur rose all around her, Mattie realized, with flushed cheeks, that everyone was thinking the same of her! Mattie felt herself the object of interest among these unattached men, all of them dressed in their best.

Mattie's eyes, however, sought out Ethan. How her heart thumped within her breast when she located him, talking to a group of men in a corner. Ethan was wearing a faultlessly tailored dark frock coat, pearl gray waistcoat, white shirt and black tie, and tight black trousers. He looked so handsome and elegant! Would he notice her? Would he ask her to dance?

As she wondered, he looked up and saw her. For some moments they stared at each other. Mattie, feeling weak in the knees, fervently wished him to cross the room and take her by the hand.

Suddenly, her view of Ethan was obscured by the figure of Jack Bridger, who had positioned himself in front of her and asked her to dance.

"No, thank you, Mr. Bridger," she said coolly, making an impatient gesture. If Ethan saw the two of them together...

"Aw, shucks, don't be like that, Miz Talbot," Jack said, pulling his mustache a little shamefacedly. "I know I ain't always behaved proper to you, but it don't mean we can't let bygones be bygones."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bridger, but you have created a—a difficult situation for me, and I can never, as you say, let bygones be bygones until it is corrected. So I must refuse." Mattie spoke with dignity and politeness, but her message was firm.

Ethan suddenly flung his pipe viciously to the ground. "Are you telling me in good faith that you are the oldest daughter of John Gray?"

Mattie quickly looked towards Ethan, and was dismayed to see that he had turned his back on her and was engaged in conversation.

What, then, did it matter if she looked her best this evening? That others had noticed and complimented her appearance? Ethan was the one for whom she had dressed, she now realized, and he couldn't care less!

While she was having such upsetting thoughts a stranger approached, tall and slim and well dressed. He introduced himself and asked if he might have the honor of dancing with her.

Mattie nodded recklessly and gave him her hand. Why not? Ethan wouldn't care. Suddenly determined to have a good time in spite of the way Ethan had spurned her, Mattie smiled at her partner and engaged in animated conversation with him during the dance.

At the end of the dance another man

approached and asked to be presented. Before she knew what had happened, Mattie had been whisked away on his arm and was now dancing a lively waltz. "Your husband doesn't dance, Mrs. Talbot?" her partner asked solicitously.

"Not on this occasion," replied Mattie, laughingly making a joke about the weariness of the party after their arduous journey.

Suddenly she could no longer locate Ethan. Straining her eyes, Mattie looked again and again, as she turned around the floor, but without success.

Suddenly all interest in the ball vanished for her. Mattie wanted nothing more than to leave, to stop smiling and chatting and flirting. It all seemed so silly, so meaningless.

"Dinah," she called to the child. "It's late. Time to go."

"Oh, please, Mama, just a little while longer," begged Dinah.

"No, dear, I'm sorry. It's way past your bedtime. Your father has gone as well," Mattie said. She must have sounded more grim than she intended.

As they drew near the wagon, Mattie flicked the tears from her lashes and made a valiant attempt to pull herself together for the child's sake. "Did you enjoy yourself, darling?" she asked Dinah softly.

"Oh, yes, I did," the girl replied happily. "I remember balls at the plantation when I was tiny. My—my first Mama wore a beautiful dress and danced every dance, just as you did tonight."

"Did your father dance too?" Mattie asked, unable to resist the question.

Dinah frowned in concentration, as she let Mattie help her out of her dress. "I don't remember. I think he was away in the war. Uncle Bart was always there, though."

"Was Uncle Bart your mother's brother, or your father's?"

"I don't know. I don't think he was anyone's brother. He went away when Papa came back." Dinah yawned.

After she tucked Dinah in, Mattie saw Ethan leaning against the front of the wagon, smoking his pipe. He, too, was still dressed in his finery. He hadn't yet seen Mattie, and she stopped short and held her breath for several moments, staring at him unobserved.

Aurora had continued to preside at balls, according to Dinah: But who was Uncle Bart, and why had he gone away? Had he been pursuing Aurora, when Ethan was away fighting?

Ethan suddenly whirled and caught Mattie staring at him. "What the devil—are you trying to give me a fright or what?" he asked gruffly.

Mattie jumped and turned away in confusion. "I—I'm sorry."

"Wait. Come here a moment," Ethan demanded. "Made quite a splash tonight, didn't you?"

"Yes, Yes, I did!" Mattie retorted defiantly. "And why not? Is that not what a ball is for? For enjoyment? Don't we deserve some innocent fun after that hideous journey?"

"Innocent fun! Is that what you call it? You are like two entirely different women! One is courageous and bold, rushing into flames to save a child, while the other—" he curled his lip with scorn, "the other is a hopeless coquette, fickle and unfaithful—"

"How dare you!" Mattie interrupted angrily. "How dare you accuse me of being unfaithful! To whom? To what? The marriage vows I made were based upon our living together as man and wife—"

"Haven't you been deceitful and dishonest?" he demanded hoarsely.

"No, I haven't! I never went anywhere near Jack Bridger. On the contrary, I have done my best to avoid him—"

"Long before Jack Bridger," Ethan suddenly shouted at her. "You haven't acted in good faith—"

"But I have!" she cried. "I haven't done anything, I swear it!"

Ethan suddenly flung his pipe viciously to the ground. "Are you telling me in good faith that you are the oldest daughter of John Gray?" he asked, his eyes glittering.

A cold fear gripping her chest, Mattie bowed her head as the tears started to her eyes. "I—how do you—when did you find out?" Mattie whispered guiltily.

"I knew the first moment I saw you, you ridiculous woman! It is possible for a child to grow up looking different, certainly. The young girl I remembered was a flaxen-haired beauty. True, her hair might have darkened. But it is unlikely that eyes that were as blue as the back of a jaybird should have turned as brown as a hazelnut! What sort of fool did you take me for? When I first saw you I would cheerfully have strangled you for trying to pass off on me such a pathetic deception. If John Gray had not been an old and admired friend I would have shipped you right back where you came from!"

"Oh, how I wish you had!" Mattie cried passionately.

"And yet you were willing to go along with your father's deception," Ethan said coldly.

"No! I was not! I was most unwilling, I assure you! I argued and begged and pleaded! But then, I realized that I was superfluous! That my next oldest sister could take over the raising of the younger children. I was only in the way! And Papa thought it would be better for me to go to you than to remain at home, a spinster. I didn't want to go, but I felt as if I were taking the bread out of the others' mouths! I dreaded meeting you. I knew very well that it was Felicity you wanted,

that you would—you would never be satisfied with me—”

“Not necessarily,” interrupted Ethan with a growl. “If you father had told me the truth, I’d have taken you in any case—”

“Thank you! Thank you very much!” Mattie cried, beside herself with anguish. “Perhaps it never occurred to you that I don’t want to be ‘taken in any case,’ as you so eloquently put it. However, when we reach California, you can be untricked. We can annul this mockery of a marriage! Even though,” she choked out, “it will kill me to have to leave Dinah! For I love her as much as I could ever love any child of my own!”

“Don’t cry, Mattie,” Ethan said at length, a weary resignation in his voice. “I won’t hold you to the marriage, if that’s the way you feel. I’ll—I’ll let you go, especially after the display you’ve made with Jack Bridger. You can not convince me that you did not accept his embraces.”

“I didn’t accept them! I fought him off as best I could. Besides, he—he threatened to tell you that I wasn’t Felicity,” Mattie admitted shamefacedly.

“After that incident with Jack that you witnessed, I threatened him with a pistol. I—I told him if he ever came near me for any reason I would shoot him dead! I meant it. I didn’t care any more what he told you. It wouldn’t have mattered. You didn’t want me. Oh, I could see, after a while that you were missing a woman so that even—even I would do in a pinch—”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ethan exploded, clenching his fists. “It makes no sense at all! You say when Jack first kissed you he took you by surprise, and that’s why you gave in. But what about when I kissed you? Was that also a surprise? Why did you kiss me back? Put your arms around my neck, and—and—”

“It was a surprise, yes. But it was dif-

ferent,” she murmured, blushing furiously.

“Different how?”

“When you kissed me I realized—I realized—that I loved you! Now are you satisfied?” Mattie fled into the woods, weeping.

“On the contrary,” Ethan murmured. “I care very much about you, Mattie.”

“Mattie!” Ethan called after her. “Mattie!”

Just as he started to follow her Jack Bridger stepped from behind a tree and blocked his path.

“Hold on there, boss, hold your horses,” Jack cautioned, in a none-too-sober voice. “Just afore you go tearin’ off half-cocked like you always do, I got a couple of things to tell you. Like, for instance, I’m quittin’ as scout right now.”

Ethan stopped trying to get past Jack, his mind suddenly clearing as he remembered his responsibilities as wagon master. “Why? We’re almost at the end. It’s less than another couple of weeks—”

“I know, I know. That’s just the point, boss. I done brung you the worst of the way. Got you over the nastiest hurdles, didn’t I? I decided I’m a-gittin’ too old to make this here journey back and forth.”

Ethan was silent for a moment.

“I mean to say, Mr. Talbot, that I don’t expect you to give me my whole fee. No, sir, I’ll just take what you think it was worth—”

“It’s all right, Jack,” Ethan said, sighing deeply. “Here you are. That about takes care of it, I think,” he said, handing Jack his money.

When Jack straightened up, he looked

Ethan in the eye, a rather sheepish expression on his face. "I got somethin' more to say to you, Mr. Talbot. Like you said, I know you don't rightly cotton to me—"

"That's right, I don't," Ethan said grimly, fixing Jack with a cool stare.

Jack shifted his feet and hesitated a moment.

Looking at him, Ethan's face blanched. "What are you trying to say? You aren't intending to—to take my—my wife with you—"

Jack suddenly burst out laughing. "Oh, boss, that's funny! That sure is funny. Me and Miz Talbot." Jack laughed heartily and shook his head. "That's what I wanted to tell you. You got no cause to blame her on account of me. I knowed I shouldn't of done it, but she took on so high and mighty, like I was dirt or somethin'. I could tell right off that she was as innocent as a newborn babe, and I kinda teased her somethin' awful. I made her so mad she wouldn't of give me the right time of day. I got sore, my pride, you know. All I can say is I tried and tried every which way, and that gal of yours never give me a tumble, no sir. Shucks, if you wasn't blind you would've seen from the first that she's plumb loco over you."

Without waiting to hear another word, Ethan ran past Jack and tore through the woods. "Mattie! Mattie!"

As he burst from the woods into a clearing, he stopped short, for there was Mattie, seated on a flat rock, while the pale moon on high shone upon her.

Ethan slowly approached her, his hands hanging limply at his sides.

"Before you say anything, Ethan," Mattie told him steadily, "I would like you to know that I was quite serious in releasing you from the marriage. Please don't think—that because I was overcome a while back there is any reason for you not to honor my offer—"

"Hush, Mattie," Ethan said softly. "I just paid Jack Bridger off, for he's remaining in Virginia City. Before we called it quits he told me the truth about you and him. I'm sorry I didn't believe you instead of that lying snake!"

Looking at her steadily, Ethan chewed his lower lip. "You see, since I knew from the first moment that you had deceived me about which daughter you were—well, I had no reason to trust your word in anything. But I was wrong about Jack. Please forgive me, Mattie," he finished in a low voice.

"Of course I forgive you," Mattie murmured, sighing. "It doesn't really matter anyway. I know very well that I'm the wrong girl for you," she said, the tears suddenly misting her eyes once more.

"On the contrary," Ethan murmured hoarsely, drawing nearer to her. "I care very much about you, Mattie." He pulled her into his arms gently.

Mattie wanted to resist, but he held her so carefully, and kissed her lips with such tenderness, that a great aching feeling gripped her heart.

She suddenly broke away, flailing her arms to keep him from her. "I don't want your pity!" she cried. "It was *your* idea to have a marriage of convenience."

"I said that only in the beginning. I was angry at the deception, angry that your father had seen fit to send another daughter, and that she had seen fit to come. Granted, I was bitter about that and other things as well. But it wasn't because I didn't find you attractive."

"I don't believe you!" Mattie cried.

"Then believe this, you fool woman," Ethan muttered, grabbing her to him in a viselike grip. He kissed her with such rapacious force that his hard, demanding mouth bruised her soft lips, while his strong hands caressed her over and over, exploring her form with compelling

urgency.

"Let us forget the past, Mattie. Come here, my lovely wife, with the golden hair and the golden eyes. Come here and kiss me."

Her pulse racing wildly, Mattie still hung back. "I beg you, Ethan, don't make it any harder for me," she cried, the tears welling in her eyes once more. "I know you will never again love anyone as you did Aurora, least of all me! And I love you so very much," she whispered, her throat aching, "that I couldn't bear to be compared with Aurora, as I have always been compared with Felicity—"

"What! Compare you with Aurora? Never! You know nothing about it," Ethan shouted suddenly, his eyes burning.

"Aurora, I'm afraid, was coquettish, two-faced and cruel." He stopped speaking for a moment, letting that sink in.

Mattie caught her breath.

"Less than two years after we were married I caught her with another man. It was Aurora who turned me so bitter, who taught me to be so suspicious of women. Dinah was only a baby, and she needed her mother, so I did nothing then, except to go off to war. I realized that Aurora's surface beauty had fooled me into thinking there was a lot more to her than in actual fact. When I returned to the plantation, I found Aurora still up to her old tricks," he continued bitterly, "even though she was dying. For me, she had died a long time ago."

Mattie suddenly remembered Dinah's reference to "Uncle Bart," who had gone away when Ethan returned from the war.

"Two years later, I thought perhaps I could have one last chance to be happy. I thought perhaps I could bring myself to trust a woman again. Especially since Dinah was so willful and unhappy, and so obviously needed a mother. And yet,"

Ethan looked at Mattie shamefacedly, "and yet I would have made the same mistake again—with Felicity."

With those words, Ethan gathered Mattie to him in a tender embrace. "After my initial disappointment because I had been expecting your sister, I began slowly to fall in love with you. You have all the qualities I have always wanted in a woman and despaired of finding."

Mattie was so overcome by his words that she could barely breathe. Still, she softly probed, "Then why didn't you say anything—"

"I fear I allowed my jealousy to come between us. I couldn't let you see I had fallen in love with you so you could laugh at me and then taunt me about Jack. I had determined never to play the jealous husband again. And I was so proud, so sensitive, so foolishly stubborn. Oh, my wonderful, darling Mattie, I have loved you more each day. I tried not to, but I couldn't help it. I was wild with wanting you!"

Finally Mattie began to see that he was speaking the truth. She could hardly believe that such exquisite happiness was to be hers, and her eyes lit up with the most beautiful glow.

Ethan smiled joyfully at her. "I see it in your eyes, my sweet, but I'd like to hear you say it, once more."

"I love you Ethan. More than that, I adore you," whispered Mattie.

They embraced, tenderly at first, with the growing joy of becoming familiar with each other's eyes and lips. Very soon, however, their arms around each other tightened, as their lips and bodies fused. They sought to quench their long-suffered mutual thirst to yield completely to each other, a thirst as compelling as the one that consumed them in the desert. ♥



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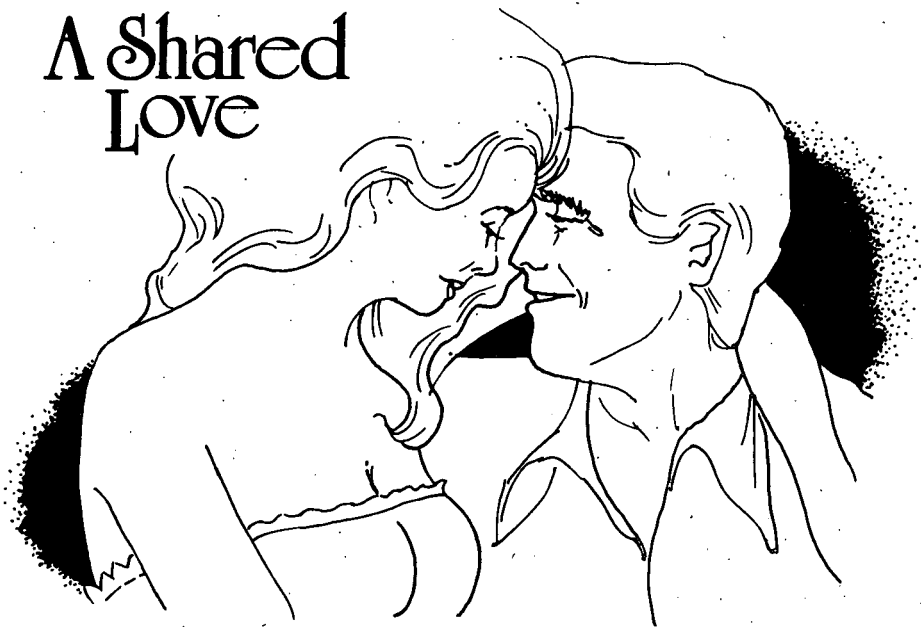
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A Shared Love



His compelling blue eyes and loving caresses released within her the passion she had denied all her life. But did he really want her, or was it all a pretense to get to her adopted child?

By ELISA STONE

Courtney Delmastro forced her mind to leave the notes and mock-up back in the studio and concentrated her energies on the monologue of her eager 2-year-old daughter, who seemed bent on describing every small event of her morning walk with Hannah, her baby-sitter.

As her chatter continued Tracey was assured of her mother's undivided attention and she gradually settled down to eat lunch.

Courtney's dark eyes clouded as she recalled her mother's reaction to her plans to adopt a child.

A formidable woman when opposed,

Aileen Garrett had grimaced and shaken her head impatiently. "Good Lord, Courtney, you're already twenty-five years old. How are you ever going to find a husband if you're saddled with a baby who isn't even your own?"

"She *will* be my own," Courtney had said tightly, "and in a far more meaningful way than if I were merely accepting responsibility for an accident. Relax, *mother*. You've already found three husbands with relatively little trouble. Should the need arise, I have no doubt you'll find a fourth, grandchild or no grandchild."

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As Courtney thought of the child so soon to become her own, her frown had faded quickly and her deep brown eyes had taken on a new glow: I won't get my priorities mixed up, she had vowed. I won't permit my parents' mistakes to affect my future. Tracey will always come first. She'll be all I need.

So, for the past two years, Courtney's life had been regulated and insular, providing her with what she considered the best possible kind of security. Aided financially by the trust fund set up at the time of her father's death, Courtney was fortunate enough to be able to order her life as it pleased her. Although she wasn't wealthy, she could support herself and her daughter in comfort.

Upon her graduation from college, armed with a degree in fine arts, Courtney had reluctantly agreed to let her father introduce her to the art director of a well-known New York publishing house, after which she had made her own way. Her skill in jacket design and her willingness to try bold, new approaches won their respect for her work, and she was gradually assigned to more and more prestigious projects. At the time Tracey's adoption was formalized Courtney had made the decision to leave her position at Lindon House and free-lance. She still maintained a good relationship with them, and had been assigned many choice books to work on.

"You know, Hannah, I could never hold it all together without you," Courtney said, watching Hannah bend to wipe Tracey's sticky face.

Hannah flushed with pleasure. "Now, what brought that on?"

"Woolgathering," Courtney admitted. Her slim fingers brushed back the hair that fell gently against her cheek. "I like to think I'm totally self-sufficient, but I really do depend heavily on you. It's

wonderful to know that Tracey is so well cared for."

"Ach." Hannah dismissed the praise with a careless wave of her hand. "You two are my family now." She dried her hands and tossed the towel onto the counter top. "What are you working on?"

"Tomorrow morning I have a session with the author of the Nicholas and Alexandra book."

"With the author?" Hannah questioned. "Isn't it a bit unusual for an author to have a say about his jacket design?"

"Yes," Courtney confirmed, "but for some reason Lindon House is giving this guy the kid-gloves treatment."

"Is he famous?"

"Not in the popular sense," Courtney said slowly. "I understand he's done some excellent work in history, but just for the academic market, and published in Great Britain. This is his first novel, and it's good."

"What's his name?"

"Hager. Mark Hager," Courtney said. "Pete tells me he liked my jacket for the Eisenhower biography and asked to meet me." She stood, stretched her arms high, and flexed on her toes. "Enough about Mr. Hager." She grimaced, arms falling again to her sides. "I'm sure I'll be sick of the man before the next few weeks are over."

Courtney was unaware of the qualities people generally saw in her. Her carriage was always straight and she moved quickly, appearing self-assured. Her face, in direct contrast, was a mixture of piquant beauty and shy hesitancy. Women envied her; men were slow to approach her. Few of either sex felt they knew her very well.

Only Hannah was fully aware of the vulnerability beneath Courtney's mien of self-confidence, and she was careful to conceal the knowledge. The wise old woman knew how protectively Courtney

guarded the tiny chinks in her armor, and she never pushed beyond the accepted boundary.

Later that afternoon, as Courtney made her way home on the subway from an appointment, she found herself drawn to two teenage girls, their heads pressed together as they giggled and whispered. One of the girls had a mop of flaxen curls. Tracey's hair will probably look just like that, Courtney thought. Just like Diana's. The thought hit her with disquieting force.

I haven't thought of her in months, Courtney realized almost guiltily. Diana McIlven, with the pale hair and wide green eyes. The frightened young girl who was Tracey's natural mother.

When Courtney's uncle, Dr. Karl Matthews, heard that she had filed with the state adoption service, he had paid her a late-night visit. A quiet, gruff man and a veteran physician in a leading cancer clinic, he had become concerned about the plight of one of his patients.

"She's only twenty years old, Court," Karl had explained, his large hands cupped around a blue coffee mug and his brooding eyes staring down into the dark liquid. "This girl has made it through difficult problems, against impossible odds, and yet she still has this... this quality of innocence..." His voice died away and for a long moment he was silent. He glanced at Courtney and laughed softly, uneasily. "Objectivity seems to have gone by the board with this one, sweetheart."

"She's really gotten to you," Courtney had said gently.

"I'll say," Karl had sighed and leaned his head against the couch. "I've rarely seen such determination. There's no telling how long Diana's remission would have lasted if it weren't for the pregnancy. What a shock. There was no talking to her, no alternative she would even

discuss. She was going to take her chances and have the baby, and that was that."

"What about the baby's father?" Courtney had asked, quickly drawn into the drama. "Was he supportive? What did he want?"

"He wanted out," Karl had answered bluntly. "He never even knew about the baby, to my knowledge. He'd split by then. The cancer was too much for him—he just couldn't handle it.

"I never thought she'd last through the pregnancy, but she did. I never thought that infant would survive, but she has. She's tiny and tough and perfectly healthy."

"But how sick is the mother?" Courtney had pressed. "How long—"

"She's run out of time," Karl had interjected wearily. "She's got to go back to the hospital, but she refuses until a permanent arrangement is made for the baby."

Slowly the purpose of his visit had dawned on Courtney. Her reaction shocked her. Here it was, the solution to the frustrating three- to five-year wait for the adoptable infant. Her dream was to come true... and she was terrified.

The next days had been a blur of activity. There were lengthy, intense hours in the attorney's office and long, difficult days in Diana's apartment, where Courtney watched helplessly as the girl's strength and will faded daily. There was frantic shopping and late-night rearranging in Courtney's apartment as she moved in a daze, preparing a place to bring Tracey home to.

Diana's determination to be with her child had held out only long enough for Tracey to make the transition. When Diana had finally returned to the hospital, Courtney was her only visitor. Diana was too weary, too emotionally and physically spent, to deal with seeing Tracey again. She shared in her daughter's progress

through the daily reports and snapshots Courtney faithfully brought to her.

In the five-week period before Diana's death, Courtney had been driven by emotions and impulses she didn't fully understand. She knew nothing but joy in the flaxen-haired baby entrusted to her care, and the more deeply she came to love her, the more she felt compelled to spend time with Tracey's mother, and the two young women became close.

There had been nothing tragic, nothing self-pitying in Diana. Rather than grow depressed in her company, Courtney had found a new appreciation for life in Diana's presence. When she died it was a gentle passing, and Courtney had felt enormous relief that the girl was at last free of pain.

Damn the man. Where does he get off looking so cool and collected while I'm feeling as shy and gawky as a teenager?

The doorbell rang on the stroke of ten the next morning. Courtney hurried to answer it, checking to see if the tail of her peach-colored silk blouse was still tucked inside her designer jeans. The heels of her shoes clicked on the parquet floor of the entryway.

"You're right on time." Courtney laughed as she swung open the door. But the smile in her dark eyes faded abruptly. It was her new neighbor, who she had decided was fresh and pretentious—although attractive—on the basis of a couple of brief, momentary encounters.

"What can I do for you?" she asked coldly, even as the vivid color of his dark-lashed blue eyes attracted her eye. Why

hadn't she noticed the grooves by the sides of his mouth before? Courtney wondered distractedly. When he smiled, they deepened so attractively, virtual magnets to her curious fingertips.

"I hope you can design a magnificent jacket for my book," he replied smoothly, ignoring her hostility. "One that will entice millions to buy it and take it home with them."

Courtney was stunned. "You're Mark Hager?"

"I am." He crossed the threshold quickly and gently extracted her frozen hand from the knob as he closed the door. "And I seem to have started off on the wrong foot with you, Miss Courtney Delmastro."

Courtney stared dumbly as the tall man moved to the center of the living room. A blue pullover clung to his lean torso, hanging loosely over wheat-colored jeans. Ignoring the fact that she was similarly attired, Courtney allowed herself a flash of resentment that he had not bothered to dress in a more professional fashion for what was supposed to be their first meeting.

"Very nice," he solemnly pronounced, looking about the large living room of her apartment.

Finding her tongue at last, Courtney said tightly, "I'm so glad you approve, Mr. Hager."

"Mark," he corrected with a wide grin. "And I certainly do approve. I hope a similarly exquisite taste will be reflected in your work for me."

"If you have any doubts as to my ability," Courtney responded, her back growing rigid, "I'm sure Lindon House can find you someone more to your liking."

Mark smiled. "You are entirely to my liking. I rather thought I had made that clear. I've seen some of your previous work, so my admiration is professional as

well as personal.”

Courtney felt overwhelmed by his frankness. Damn the man. Where does he get off looking so cool and collected while I’m standing here in my own home feeling as shy and gawky as a teenager?

“Would you prefer to continue playing word games,” Courtney asked quietly, “or shall we sit down like two adults and discuss our mutual project?”

Courtney’s voice betrayed only the slightest tremor of nervousness as she spoke, and the admiration she recognized in his expression as he stared back at her was gratifying.

“*Touche*,” Mark said softly. He gave a small laugh and bent his head slightly. “You win this round, Miss Delmastro. I’ll behave.” He folded his hands behind his back, tucked one sneakered foot behind the other, and suddenly looked like an overgrown, earnestly penitent child.

As his wide mouth quirked and then relaxed into an irresistible grin, Courtney found herself responding in kind. She waved him toward one end of the long couch as she went to get coffee for the two of them.

When she returned, setting the coffee-pot down on a tile on the table, Mark was standing with his back to her. He was studying a framed enlargement of a snapshot of Tracey.

Courtney moved to stand by his side. “My daughter Tracey,” she said simply.

Mark still didn’t look at her. “I saw her in the hall last night. She’s lovely. She doesn’t look anything like you, though,” he added gruffly.

“That’s because she’s adopted.”

He didn’t comment further, but Courtney was surprised at the wistful, almost hungry look on his face.

“She has beautiful eyes.”

“Yes,” Courtney agree. “You can’t really tell from this picture, but they are a

very unusual shade of blue, almost—”

“Green,” Mark supplied in a near whisper.

She turned to him, startled. “How in the world did you know that?”

“I didn’t, of course.” Mark laughed easily, now focusing his attention on her. “I just guessed. It seemed a good combination with that blond hair. She’s going to be a knockout. I would further guess that you are very happy with your little girl.”

“Of course.”

“Isn’t it a bit awkward at times, raising a child by yourself?”

“How do you know I’m doing it alone?”

“There’s only one name on your door-plate,” Mark explained teasingly. “And”—he picked up her left hand, holding it for a second longer than was necessary to demonstrate his point—“you’re not wearing a wedding ring. It wasn’t too difficult to figure out.”

Mark’s finger slowly traveled the length of her own, and Courtney pulled her hand free. She was struck by the contrast of her own pale skin against his deep tan.

“Tell me about your book,” she said suddenly. A faint blush stained her cheeks at the telltale breathlessness of her voice.

Obligingly Mark leaned back, one long arm resting casually along the back of the couch and his brown fingers almost touching her shoulder. She listened with interest as he talked about his lifelong fascination with Russian history. Her coffee grew cold as she sat quietly, absorbing every word, sensing how effective he must be in a classroom. She had, of course, already read Mark’s manuscript and when she interrupted occasionally to comment on something she remembered, Courtney could tell how pleased he was.

Without questioning her reluctance to see him go after they had finished their business, Courtney asked suddenly, “I

was going to fix a salad for lunch. Would you like to join me?"

"You know I would," Mark said softly, and Courtney turned away from the intensity of his gaze.

With the aid of a carafe of chilled white wine, luncheon was enjoyable and leisurely. When Courtney heard Hannah's key in the lock, her eyes flew to the wall clock. "We've been talking for over three hours. Can you believe it?"

She sensed Mark's reluctance to leave and wondered if his regret matched her own. His expressive eyes softened as the tired two-year-old rushed into her mother's arms, snuggled her head into her shoulder and smiled sleepily. His gaze changed subtly as it shifted to Courtney's face and lingered. Courtney found herself returning the stare with equal interest, imagining the feel of that wide, firm mouth.

"Tomorrow," Mark said in a husky tone that was both a promise and a question.

She sensed he would demand far more than she was prepared to relinquish. . . He was too experienced, too sensual. He'd consume her.

During the next week Mark was very much present in Courtney's apartment, but his visits quickly shifted from business to pleasure. Courtney found Mark the kind of attentive and interested listener one rarely encounters. He drew her out of herself, praised her work, made her laugh. In his company she felt witty and talented and, in the warm glow of his eyes, desirable.

But Mark seemed to have little to say about himself, Courtney observed. His

response to any of her inquiries typically was short and to the point. When Courtney questioned the coincidence of Mark subletting an apartment on the same floor and in the same building as her own, he merely shrugged. "It's not that big a world."

As she prepared dinner in the kitchen, listening with half an ear to Mark's and Tracey's comments as they watched *Same Street*, Courtney could still feel the tingle of his caress along her back. She felt caught, poised sharply between two worlds. Never had she enjoyed such an easy, bantering relationship with a man, but there was undeniably a tension growing between them, luring her toward something more than she wanted. She sensed that he would demand far more than she was prepared to relinquish.

To keep it easy and familiar was better, she decided. And yet, when he touched her. . .

Courtney shook away the memory, her slender fingers automatically snapping green beans into a pan of water. She smiled at Mark's Big Bird imitation and Tracey's answering giggle. My daughter is becoming as bewitched as I am, she thought.

Later that night, Courtney came out from tucking Tracey into bed to find Mark rinsing and stacking dishes in the dishwasher. She grinned. "He even cleans. I think I've found the perfect man."

Responding to the mock expression of gloom on his face, Courtney took hold of the hands he held out for her inspection. "Hmm," she pronounced seriously. "Just as I suspected: a severe case of dishwasher hands."

"Just as I suspected," Mark said, turning her words back on her even as his large hands gripped her own more securely. Lifting her hands to his mouth, he slowly kissed each soft knuckle. "Smooth, sweet, very tasty," he murmured between slow

kisses.

Courtney heard her breath catch and hold. All sensation seemed centered on the flesh his mouth was tenderly caressing. Her dark eyes closed briefly as he continued to leisurely make love to each slim finger, as though he had all the time in the world and no equally satisfying occupation.

Mark then released her so suddenly that Courtney's hands remained suspended in the air as his arms went around her waist, pulling her closer to him. Her hands were caught between them as his head bent to hers.

"Courtney," he whispered. "God, Courtney, I've waited all week to do this."

Thick, heavy lassitude flowed through her, leaving her slumped against him. His mouth moved slowly, persuasively on hers, and when his lips parted and his tongue explored more deeply, Courtney felt a rush of energy. She fought to free her hands and pull herself closer and closer, wanting to experience each taste and texture.

From chest to knees their bodies were fitted together like the pieces of a puzzle. Breathing was becoming a sweet agony. Then, suddenly and without warning, Mark's hands tangled roughly in Courtney's silky brown hair. She made a garbled sound of protest as he wrenched his mouth away and gasped. His eyes mirrored the same astonishment she was feeling.

"Dear God, Courtney. I've never felt—"

Courtney felt suspended as Mark held her away from him with two hands wrapped about her upper arms. The few inches that separated them quickly dissipated the dazed look in her velvet brown eyes and, like a slap in the face, her reason returned. He was *too* experienced, *too* sensual. He'd consume her.

Shrugging free of his hold, she stepped back and frowned. "Mark, stop. This is no good. We still have to work together."

"We just did," Mark said tersely, "and rather perfectly at that." He reached for her again, seeming to hate the distance between them, and glared as she avoided him.

"No. I'm serious, Mark. I don't want this." Courtney met the steady gaze of his hot blue eyes.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"We have a good relationship already, Mark," Courtney attempted to explain. "We enjoy each other's company, we can talk about almost anything. Why spoil it?"

"Spoil it?" Mark repeated incredulously. "Why would the fact that we would obviously be dynamite together have to spoil anything?"

Courtney let her defensiveness build into anger. "Because it doesn't last, damn it. I'd rather have a good friend than a lover any day. Friends keep longer."

Seeing from his face that she wasn't getting very far, Courtney attempted to explain. "Sex changes things, Mark. You know that. It complicates things."

Mark's frustration was clear as he roughly combed his fingers through his hair. "This conversation is crazy," he concluded.

I couldn't agree more, Courtney responded silently. She sat down heavily on the couch and fiddled with the cups on the coffee tray. Feeling she had overreacted and then failed to explain herself, Courtney glanced at Mark when the silence continued for an uncomfortably long time. When he finally spoke, she recognized his attempt at calm in the controlled monotone of his voice.

"I am trying hard to understand what is going on here. We were getting along beau-

tifully—on all levels. I was kissing you one minute, and the next minute you were acting as if I'd asked for a lifelong commitment or cooperation in an obscene act. If I remember correctly, I was the first one to come up for air," he taunted.

Courtney visibly flinched at both the crudity and the truth in his words. Her own voice when she answered was so low that Mark leaned toward her to hear.

"I'm not inhuman, Mark. I... enjoyed your kiss. You already know that." She sighed and lifted her head. "I'm no good at this game—I never have been. I don't know the rules and, frankly, I'm not much interested in learning them."

"Why not?" Mark asked bluntly.

"It's a waste of time."

Expecting him to leave in a huff, Courtney was taken aback when Mark reached over to the TV channel selector. "Is a movie okay with you? This is a pretty good one."

Defeated by his swift change of mood, Courtney merely nodded. He settled by her companionably on the couch, long legs stretched out and resting on the edge of the low table. Within five minutes he appeared completely engrossed in the detective film.

Her total awareness of him was unsettling. As a matter of fact, she silently fumed, he had done nothing but unsettle her life since he had entered it a little more than a week ago. He virtually invited himself into her apartment whenever he wanted, had worked himself into Hannah's good graces with his glib tongue, and had shamelessly charmed Tracey, playing on the fact that the child was starved for male contact. He's nothing but a male flirt, Courtney concluded. He uses that devastating smile and those incredible eyes to get whatever he wants.

Yeah, then why did he stop when you told him to? Her traitorous mind rebelled.

What really scares you about him?

I could love this man, Courtney admitted to herself for the first time. The thought was terrifying. She openly watched his face in profile, almost aching in her desire to reach out and touch the strong lines of his high cheekbones. I could truly love this man, she repeated in silent wonder. The exultant feeling died away. I would lose myself in him, lose so much of myself that when it was over I could never hold myself together again.

Courtney started as Mark's fingers slowly twined with her own. She looked down at their joined-hands, feeling their warmth, and then glanced at his face. He continued to stare at the television screen.

"Courtney, will you have dinner out with me tomorrow night?"

Ten minutes later, when the commercial came on, he nudged her shoulder impatiently. "Well?"

"No," She was surprised herself at her decision but knew it to be the right one.

"Courtney, there's no reason to do this."

"There is every reason," Courtney disagreed through a haze of unshed, angry tears.

"We need to talk," he insisted.

"And I think we've said more than enough already. Please, will you go now?"

Mark nodded curtly, and got up to leave, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Left alone, Courtney fastened the safety latch and dazedly leaned her head against the door. She felt as drained and exhausted as if her whole life had been turned around.

Courtney yawned and continued stirring the creamy pancake batter. She and Tracey had both overslept this Saturday morning, and the heavier-than-usual meal would be a combination late breakfast

How dare he walk in here after four days of complete silence, flashing that stupid smile, she thought.

and early lunch. Through the nerve-jangling sound of Saturday morning cartoons, Courtney worked by rote, greasing the griddle and pouring the batter by spoonfuls.

Both plates were filled and placed on the table when the doorbell rang.

She started upon finding Mark suddenly before her, casually leaning one arm against the doorjamb. "The same to you," he returned.

Although Courtney's eyes were flying hungrily from his shyly smiling mouth to his crisp, dark hair, her mind was angrily rebelling against her instinctive reaction. How dare he walk in here after four days of complete silence, flashing that stupid smile, she thought.

Mark's eyes seemed to take on a deeper hue as they flitted over the unbuttoned pink batiste robe and the length of slender leg exposed by her short nightgown. Snatching the robe shut, Courtney asked coldly, "What do you want? It's Saturday—I don't work on weekends."

"I want to apologize," Mark said simply.

Looking deep into his eyes, Courtney believed him. "Why, Mark?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know, honey, I truly don't. I have so many feelings for you, Courtney—all of them strong, some of them pulling me in opposite directions."

Mark caressed the exposed flesh of her lower arms with a tenderness that caused an answering tremble in Courtney. She was slowly encased in warm arms, her

cheek resting against his firm chest. "I missed you, Courtney," he whispered.

"Mark," Tracey screeched, running toward them. Courtney was half sorry, half relieved to see their private moment come to an end.

Tracey giggled wildly as Mark scooped her up and tickled her round little belly. "Hey, princess, did you miss me?"

"Oh, yes," Tracey assured him.

Mark endured a kiss loaded with maple syrup and set Tracey down on the floor. Eyeing the yellow pajamas with their tiny rabbits and green flowers, he asked with mock severity, "Don't you and your mother ever get dressed?"

Encouraged by the first broad smile she had seen on her mother's face in days, Tracey giggled again and vigorously shook her head. "No."

"Hmm," he murmured, lightly scratching his jaw. "Then how can I invite you and your mother to my house in the country? My poor animals would run away from those ferocious bunny rabbits you're wearing."

"Animals?" Tracey breathed.

"Yup. Of course you wouldn't be able to go in your bare feet," Mark observed sadly. "Maybe next time."

Looking down at her toes, Tracey was then off at a trot. "I get dressed," she promised loudly, delivering the message over her shoulder.

Mark chewed his bottom lip and smiled unrepentantly. "I know," he agreed before Courtney could voice the accusation. "I manipulated Tracey shamelessly, leaving you with no graceful way to back out, but it was the only way I could be positive you'd come to Connecticut with me. And it's very important that you come with me, Courtney."

"Connecticut?" Courtney repeated. Already her mind was casting about for excuses.

"Hold on," Mark interrupted her thoughts. "Just hear me out, hothead. I have a place in Connecticut, in a great little town called East Haddam. Think how Tracey would love it," he tempted unfairly. "There's a pony and a pond full of ducks. She'd have a ball, and it would do her a world of good to get out of the city for a while."

"I don't know," Courtney countered dubiously. "It just wouldn't look right."

Mark tempered his impatience with humor. "No one will even get a peek at you. My nearest neighbor is a half mile away. The house has four fully operational bedrooms with locks on the doors, so your honor won't be compromised."

"Look," Courtney said candidly, "I'm not so sure this would be smart for either of us. We don't even know each other that well."

"I think we know each other *very* well," Mark replied. "Time has little to do with it. I won't push you into anything you're not ready for—you have my word on that. I've missed you terribly. I just want your company, Courtney. Please?"

Wanting desperately to believe in the wistfulness she saw in his face, Courtney touched the hand that he was running through her hair. "I really would love to go, Mark," she admitted.

"Thank you. You won't regret it." Mark smiled his relief. "I'll go pack my things and come back for you in an hour."

Despite her vague misgivings, she found herself becoming excited over the prospect of a weekend in the country and two full days of Mark's company. She didn't like admitting to herself how empty and depressed she had been feeling. So quickly had he come into her life; so quickly had he become part of it. It was dangerous to become so attached to one person, she reminded herself halfheartedly.

When the car pulled to a stop in an uneven dirt driveway that wound clear around the enormous red clapboard, white-shuttered house, Courtney immediately forgot her discomfort. Her artist's eye easily spied the original eighteenth-century lines, mentally separating each section as it had been added here and there over the years.

"It really is a monstrosity, isn't it?" Mark said. "It spans two centuries, cul-ling a bit of whimsy from each generation that owned it."

"It's wonderful," Courtney exclaimed. "Oh, Mark, I envy you."

As they descended the central stairway and turned right into the long, narrow living room, Courtney found it as perfect as the rest of the house. "I love it, Mark," she said simply.

"So do I," Mark confessed.

"How long have you lived in Connecticut?" she asked.

"On and off, mostly off, for about six years." Mark turned briefly to smile at her. "Actually, I've spent very little time here. I have a retired couple who live in the guest house and take care of the place."

"It looks as though you've invested a lot in it. It's a shame you can't spend more time here."

"I've invested as much time as I can, and most of my money. As for the other, it's all part of my planning for the future. When I can support myself with my writing, I plan to live here all year round."

"It's been a long, slow process," Mark explained when they reached the kitchen, "getting the house exactly the way I want it. I've averaged two rooms a year, and, as you saw, I haven't even touched the third floor yet."

"The third floor," Courtney exclaimed as she sat down at the kitchen table. "There are three or four more rooms up

there. What on earth are you going to do with them all?"

"Fill them all with kids," Mark announced without a moment's hesitation as he sat beside her at the table. "Enough for my own ball team." He thrust a plate before her. "Here, have a cookie."

"This is wrong," Courtney moaned in protest, even as her body swayed and fitted into his with sensuous precision.

Courtney chewed without tasting. She looked away, flustered, and felt an odd pang of loss at the thought of Mark in the midst of a family of his own. "Your life seems so exciting and fulfilling now," she finally commented. "Why take the chance of having it change and perhaps not work out as you planned?"

"Few things ever work out exactly as we plan them," Mark chided with an underlying note of seriousness. He did not touch her, but Courtney felt the caress of his eyes as warmly as though he had trailed his big hands over the planes of her face. "There are many things I have just recently come to realize I want very much, Courtney."

Mark's hand, which had been resting unnoticed on her knee, squeezed gently. Again that strange lethargy overcame her, but she concentrated on her earlier decision. "Please, Mark," she whispered, "you promised no pressure."

She saw frustration flare quickly in his eyes. Ignoring Courtney, he ruffled Tracey's soft curls and urged her to finish her snack. "Ready to ride the pony?" he proposed.

That evening Mark and Courtney were

sitting on the porch stairs. A gentle breeze blew away the slightly muggy mist that had been obscuring the moon's full beauty. The sudden brightness of that white sphere as it hung above the dark lace of the maple leaves was too much for Courtney. All day she had been fighting the spine-tingling awareness of Mark's masculinity. And now, here they were again, close enough to reach out and touch. Too full of emotion, too confused and tired and exhilarated, Courtney bade Mark a quick and quiet good-night in a wavering voice.

After checking on Tracey, Courtney walked softly down the length of the uncarpeted hallway to her own room. It was sparsely furnished, probably to avoid any distraction from the commanding beauty of the dark walnut poster bed.

Courtney sat on the side of the double bed, leaving the room lit only by the soft lamp on the dresser. When the door opened, she knew no surprise or alarm, only a quick sense of completion that she immediately resisted.

"I wouldn't have come if I hadn't known in my heart that you wanted me to," Mark said hoarsely. He crossed the room in two long strides and drew Courtney gently to her feet.

"You're wrong," Courtney moaned in protest, even as her body swayed and fitted into his with sensuous precision. "You're wrong, Mark. This is wrong..."

"I'm right," Mark insisted quietly when his mouth finally freed hers and left it gasping. "This is right." His hands were unsteady and Courtney responded in kind as he touched the corner of her mouth and then caressed her neck and the luxuriant fullness of her long, brown hair.

"I wouldn't force you, angel," Mark murmured as his hands slid down the slippery material of her nightgown. "You

know I wouldn't. But please, Courtney, don't send me away."

Courtney leaned deeper into his embrace. "Send you away?" she repeated dazedly. Hiding her face in his shoulder, safely away from his intense, probing eyes, Courtney whispered brokenly, "Oh, Mark, please hold me. Tight. Tight."

Mark bent and lifted Courtney in his arms, then moved to the bed and laid her back against the pillow. A strange smile broke over his face as he arranged her glossy dark hair over the white pillow cover. "So many times I've dreamed of this," he murmured. "You're even more beautiful than I imagined you, Courtney."

Courtney's mouth hungrily searched for his while both her slender, trembling arms locked tight about his neck. Her body shifted, straining to greet his and answer his silent plea.

Then there was the fall from the precipice, a crazy glide and slow descent, a warmth outside and within. Such sweet, heavy weight pressed down on her, damp limbs sprawled and entwined with her own.

"Mark," she said contentedly.

Later, sitting in the kitchen while Mark brewed coffee and poked around in the refrigerator, Courtney found herself keyed up and talkative. She was so busy chattering that she didn't at first realize that Mark was not participating.

Mark abruptly sat and pulled her down onto his lap. His eyes were again soft and tender, but the lines of his mouth were serious, even a bit grim. "Courtney." His lips pressed her shoulder. "We have to talk. There are things about me you don't know. Things that might change your feelings."

"Goodness, this does sound serious," Courtney said lightly. "Are you wanted

for murder?"

"No." He looked exasperated at the interruption.

Courtney kissed both lean cheeks. "Are you, God forbid, married?"

"Good Lord, no."

"Then," Courtney concluded happily. "there is nothing else I would consider important enough to intrude on my happiness tonight." A thought, unbidden, came to her, and her uneasiness flew back in. "Mark," she asked hesitantly, "we will have more time together, won't we?"

"A lifetime," Mark assured her. His hand sifted through her hair, lifting it from her neck to make room for his lips.

Courtney's hands cupped his face as she drew his mouth close to hers. The fire quickly ignited between them, and Mark's arms became more insistent. "I haven't eaten yet," he protested lightly.

Courtney smiled as his urgent hands gave life to his words. "We can do that later, too," she murmured.

"I have the feeling you've carefully set up rigid little boundaries and every once in a while I trample over them."

"Talk to me," Mark urged the next morning when they went walking in the countryside.

She smiled. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," he said promptly. He coiled a length of her rich brown hair around his finger. "I want to know all the important things."

Mark leaned forward to touch his mouth to hers, lightly running his tongue along the edges of her perfect white teeth. "Like whose little darling were you—

Mommy's or Daddy's?"

The playful mood evaporated. "Neither," Courtney said quietly. "I was a shared responsibility." She sifted pine needles between her fingers and studiously avoided his eyes. "My parents divorced when I was six. I spent part of each year with each of them."

"That must have been difficult."

"They tried," Courtney admitted, "but it was always so damned awkward. When Daddy remarried . . . well, I hated it. Poor Marian," she said ruefully. "I never gave the poor woman a chance. I would just start to get comfortable with them and then it was time to go back to my mother's. And that was even worse. She was dating a lot and even at seven I knew she was trying to keep me out of the way."

Courtney's voice was quiet and contemplative.

"When I was ten my mother married Andrew." A soft smile of remembrance flitted across her face. "I really loved that man. He was ten years older than Mother, with no children of his own, and he spoiled me shamelessly. When I was twelve Daddy and Marian divorced and I spent that summer at camp while they argued over who was getting what. I went back to my mother's in August and Andrew was gone. I never saw him again. Needless to say, I didn't allow myself to become close to the next one."

Courtney twisted away from his hand, which was trailing gently down her arm. "It doesn't matter anymore," she said tightly. "It's ancient history."

"I don't think so. Is this why you always back away from me, Courtney? I have the feeling you've carefully set up rigid little boundaries and every once in a while I trample over them."

"I don't mean to do that, Mark." She looked troubled. "I want to be able to

relax and tr—"

"Go ahead," Mark said grimly. "You were going to say 'trust.'"

"It's not *you*," Courtney said slowly. "Please try to understand that." She lifted one of his large brown hands between her own and gently stroked each long finger. "If there is any person in the world I could trust, it's you. I don't know why I'm so afraid. I guess it's because something destructive seems to happen when people try to make that final commitment to each other. Maybe that kind of permanency is just too much to demand of ourselves."

Mark searched her face closely and the tension seemed to ease slowly out of him. "I'm going to change your mind about that," he vowed confidently.

When Courtney smiled it was a sudden, bright sun on a cloudy day. "You think so?" she challenged.

"I know so," he bragged.

Mark jumped to his feet and pulled Courtney up with him. "Let's get out of here, wood nymph, before I'm tempted to do something that's definitely frowned upon in public land."

On their return they reclaimed Tracey from Effie, the housekeeper, and left for an afternoon on Mark's boat. They spent the next couple of hours out on the river, playing, talking, fishing. It was glorious, but she was tired when they returned. Mark suggested that he and Tracey drive down to the coast for lobsters, and that she take a nap while they were gone.

Such a beautiful day, she thought. Her eyes closed drowsily. She thought of Mark's attentiveness, his obvious desire for her, his thoughtfulness with Tracey. Perfect, perfect day. Perfect man. She stretched out on the lounge and fell limp, finding it harder and harder to keep her eyes open. I love him, was her last conscious thought, and the admission filled

her with deep contentment.

Courtney awoke to a harsh voice. She flinched and tried to slide back into oblivion.

"Damn it, Courtney, wake up," Mark insisted roughly.

Wondering at his tone, Courtney opened her eyes to see him towering above her, a large Styrofoam box cradled in his arms. She moved to sit up and then cried out in pain.

"Don't move," Mark ordered grimly. "You're redder than these damned lobsters." He set the box down on the deck and bent over her. "I didn't think you'd be so stupid as to fall asleep in the sun." His voice was high with helpless anger.

"Well, I certainly didn't do it on purpose," Courtney said through gritted teeth. Her back felt as though it was on fire, and Mark's face softened as two tears slid down her cheeks.

Feeling like the biggest fool alive, Courtney allowed Mark to lower her to the bed. She turned her face to the wall and fought the tears. "It hurts so much," she admitted with a sob.

She closed her eyes tightly, even that slight movement causing sharp pain. Suddenly her head shot up as Tracey screamed and there was a clattering, crashing noise. Mark reflexively pressed down on Courtney's back, unwittingly adding to her agony. "Stay put."

He was on his feet instantly and crossing the small room to where Tracey stood entangled in the forgotten fishing gear she had been investigating. Blood poured from her finger where a hook was embedded, and she shrieked again as she tried to pull it out.

"What's wrong?" Courtney called.

Mark knelt, holding the sobbing child with one arm and opening the tackle box with his free hand. "She's got a hook

stuck in her finger," he explained distractedly. "I've got to get her to a hospital."

He heard the fear in Courtney's voice but had no time to soothe her. "You've got blisters on the soles of your feet," he informed her bluntly. "Don't get up."

***"Why didn't I see it before?
The way you pursued me, your
clever way of including Tracey
in our relationship. . . ."***

"I've got to go with you," Courtney insisted, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

"No. Will you just for once trust me?" Mark shouted. He looked distraught as Tracey writhed against him, still screaming. Flecks of blood stained his white knit shirt. "I won't let anything happen to her. For God's sake, she's my own—" He clamped his mouth shut and strode angrily toward the door. "Has she had her tetanus shots?"

"Yes," Courtney said automatically. Her head was throbbing. She listened to his quick footsteps and the sound of Tracey's sobs as they faded away. For one awful moment she thought she was going to black out as she lay back down on her stomach. She struggled against it, and then the renewed pain in her back and legs kept her conscious.

The thought of Tracey with that vicious, two-pronged hook in her finger brought fresh tears to Courtney's eyes. She fought another wave of nausea, clinging to the mattress. She *had* to go to her. Bracing one arm against the wall, she moved to sit up again, shaking her head against the dizziness that accompanied the movement.

Footsteps alerted her to Mark's return. Painfully turning her head, Courtney smiled as Tracey's face came into line with her own. "Hi, baby."

"I got five sews in my finger," Tracey announced proudly, displaying a tiny, well-bandaged finger.

"My God, I hope I never have another half hour like that again. How do you feel?" Mark asked.

"Like a victim of the Inquisition."

"Oh, yes. Here." Mark reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a small vial. He shook out a yellow tablet and gave it to Courtney, then stood to get a glass of water. "You're supposed to take this. It'll reduce the pain and help you sleep."

Courtney gazed at Mark and suddenly everything became clear.

"Don't touch me." Her voice was low and sharp. Mark stepped back. "I'm fully alert Mark, and my mind is working clearly now."

Courtney drew a quick breath and laughed shortly, eerily. "Why didn't I see it before?" she marveled aloud. "The way you pursued me, your clever way of including Tracey in our relationship. It's really too bad you slipped, Mark. There's no telling how long you would have been able to keep your vile little game going."

Mark's voice was as stiff as his shoulders. "What are you talking about?"

"I know the truth, Mark."

"And that is?" he demanded hoarsely.

Her dark eyes suddenly looking dead and flat, Courtney whispered, "You're Tracey's father."

The air in the tiny, sunlit cabin was charged with electric tension. Mark raked his fingers through his dark, tousled hair and laughed softly. The muscles in his long, firm thighs were taut.

"I'll go put Tracey down for a nap," he said tightly. "Then we can talk."

"You know only the tiniest portion of the truth," he announced when he returned, "and you have managed to twist that into the wrong conclusion."

"I *heard* you," Courtney said shrilly. "I heard what you started to say. You were trying to tell me Tracey was your—"

"Niece," Mark broke in smoothly. His chest heaved once as he drew a quick breath, and then his voice became softer. "Diana was my half-sister."

Courtney tossed back the hair that was falling into her face. "I don't believe you."

"No matter what you think of me right now," Mark said, "you know how much I love that little girl. Almost as much as I love you. If she *were* my daughter, I would have fought tooth and nail for her in every court in the country. I'm her uncle, Courtney, not her father."

Mark's admission was dimly heard but not assimilated. Courtney bowed her dark head and her tangled hair fell as a natural veil to hide her face. She was filled with too many raw emotions.

"Why didn't you tell me right away?" she asked painfully, groping for some measure of strength to deal with this awful blow. "Why did you lie to me? You tricked me, Mark. I would have been upset at first, sure, but I would have adjusted to the idea. I would have let you see Tracey. I . . . I loved Diana. I would never have kept you from her child."

"I have never lied to you, Courtney," Mark said faintly.

Courtney confronted him heatedly. "You may not have lied outright, but you were far from honest with me." Hurt poured out in every angry word. "You gave me nothing but half truths and evasions. God, when I think of how you manipulated me. You used me to get to Tracey."

"I didn't use you," Mark began. He

looked weary and shaken. "I manipulated the situation—I can't deny that. But everything changed after I met you, after I saw the two of you together. Everything I wanted... changed." After glancing at her disbelieving eyes and tense shoulders, Mark stifled a half-uttered curse and stood abruptly.

"For days now—weeks—I've struggled with knowing this moment would come. The longer I put it off, the easier it became to prolong it even more."

When his fingers reached to touch hers, Courtney flinched and pulled her hand free. He was too good at attacking her tactile senses, she reflected waspishly. "Don't do that."

Mark's eyes became wary and hooded. "You don't intend to give me a chance to explain, do you?"

"Mark, what's the use?"

"The use is, we have something valuable enough to try to salvage. Don't throw it away, Courtney."

"There is precious little to throw away at this point," Courtney said with glowing heat.

She closed her eyes, "Go away."

There was a long silence, and then she heard him leave.

***She missed being held and loved.
But was it love? How could he
claim to love her and still practice
such deception?***

Courtney hadn't seen Mark since he brought her home three days ago. He called every day. As luck would have it, Hannah had answered the phone each time. The pattern was always the same: Mark asked how Courtney was feeling and spoke

briefly to Tracey, but he never asked to speak to Courtney.

And Courtney was unsure how she felt about that. There was so much anger and hurt inside her, and yet there was an undeniable emptiness there, too.

The doorbell rang. Her eyes immediately registered concern, taking in the fatigue in Mark's shadowed eyes and the day-old growth of beard, the rumpled shirt.

"You're looking much better."

"I'm fine."

"May I come in?"

"Of course," Courtney closed the door and turned to him. "Mark, are you all right?"

Her fingers closed naturally around his, leading him to the couch, the gesture completed before she could think about it.

"I know you want answers, Courtney... explanations. But I can't give them to you tonight. Please understand. I need to know about Diana. I can't stand not knowing anymore."

"What do you want to know?" Courtney asked guardedly.

"What she was feeling... thinking."

Mark wrenched his hand from Courtney's as he got to his feet. He paced across the room before stopping in front of the fireplace, his palms resting on the mantelpiece. "I was ten years old when my father remarried, twelve when Diana was born. She was so sweet, so much... so much like Tracey. You can't imagine how I felt the first time I saw Tracey in the hallway with you."

Mark turned to face her, his tired eyes meeting hers. "I had just about decided to approach you openly, to give up this idiotic scheme I had concocted."

When he remained silent, Courtney, asked, "Why didn't you?"

"Fear... and selfishness." Mark's eyes

tugged at her from across the room, and Courtney was surprised by the strength of the impulse she felt to go to him, despite what he was saying. "I didn't know you, Courtney. I thought my sudden appearance might be so threatening to you that you would never let me near Tracey. And I couldn't stand that. One look at that little girl and I felt I'd found Diana again. I'm sorry, Courtney. More sorry than you'll ever know. But I couldn't risk it."

She couldn't think of anything to say. Silence spun out between them until Mark continued. "Every time I held her, I felt fourteen years old again, holding my baby sister."

The pain in Mark's voice as he uttered these last words was so acute Courtney was shocked, and she suddenly came to her senses. All reserve fled as she flew off the couch and across the room to embrace him. She murmured his name gently as her hands soothed and stroked instinctively.

Mark's arms loosened and fell away as he raised his head. He opened his mouth and Courtney gently placed her finger across his lips. "Come sit down. You look tired enough to drop."

Courtney opened a cupboard and, a moment later, a square leather box was in her hands.

"I've been saving these for Tracey, for when she's old enough to understand." Courtney's hands ran lovingly over the box. "Diana and I talked many times about how I would tell her. We wanted her to know how much she was loved—by both of us."

Courtney unfastened the clasp on the box and withdrew a pile of color snapshots. Silently she placed them in Mark's outstretched hands. His face was still expressionless but the strain this caused him was clear as he slowly looked through the pictures. When Mark at last turned to

Courtney, he wore a smile that showed his ease of spirit as he requested softly, "Tell me about them."

"This one," Courtney said, pointing, "was taken at Diana's apartment." She selected another. "This one was taken on her birthday."

Mark studied them. "She looked so thin, so frail."

"Only on the outside." Courtney smiled fondly at the picture. "Inside she was pure steel. She kept my uncle waiting—" She stopped suddenly. "You do know about my uncle, don't you?"

"Yes," Mark said, meeting her eyes unflinchingly.

Courtney felt a stab of remembered anger. There were still so many questions, so many doubts. She turned her attention back to the snapshot. "I was wallpapering the room that was to be Tracey's. I had brought the sample book over to Diana's and she helped me pick out the pattern. She was getting weaker and Uncle Karl wanted her in the hospital, but she refused to go until the room was finished and she could see it."

"The thing that haunted me most," Mark admitted, "was the thought of her being alone, especially at the end."

"She wasn't alone, not a single day that I knew her," Courtney said. "And don't thank me, Mark," she added most fiercely. "She gave me the most precious thing in my life. *I'm* the one who should be doing the thanking."

"You have, many times over, in the care you give Tracey," Mark said firmly. "It blows me away to realize how carefully you've planned to let Tracey know about her moth—"

"It's all right." Courtney smiled at his look of guilt. "I've long since made my peace with the fact that Tracey has two mothers. And I don't want Tracey to feel compelled to have to search out informa-

tion when she's older, like so many adopted kids do. I want her to grow up with the knowledge that she was loved by both her mothers."

Mark carefully replaced the pictures in the leather box and closed the top. He leaned back in the couch, looking drained. "I know you don't want my gratitude," he said flatly, staring up at the ceiling, "but you will always have it."

Turning sideways on the couch, Courtney asked hesitantly, "Mark, you seem to have so much guilt about Diana. Why?"

"Because I wasn't there so many times when she needed me. Because..." Mark sighed and turned his head toward her. "Diana at sixteen was worlds apart from Diana at six. She was rebellious, angry, searching. So mule-headed on the outside, so uncertain and unsure on the inside. She ran away from home after a stupid argument with my parents about a boy she was dating. They were torn up by it, and so confused about what they were doing wrong."

"Did she come back on her own?"

"She *never* came back. She would call my folks every couple of months and tell them she was all right, but that's all." Tension seemed to be forcing Mark to sit upright. "I found her one time, strictly by accident. I was at a bar. I turned around and there she was." His fingers twisted around each other impotently. "I blew it, Courtney. Half of me wanted to grab her and hug her. The other half of me couldn't seem to forget the torture she had put us all through."

"You fought."

"Did we ever. She told me she wasn't coming home, that she was married to that stringy-haired little creep who didn't have two words to say for himself the whole hour I was with them. I just sneered and reminded her that she considered herself married and that any so-called

marriage she was involved in certainly wasn't a legal one. I was so damned frustrated. Since I couldn't very well sling her over my shoulder and carry her home, I resorted to laying a guilt trip on her."

Around the edges of her consciousness hovered all the unresolved anger, but his need for her pushed all else aside.

Mark stopped there for a moment and when he spoke again his voice was raw. "It didn't fully hit me how wrong I had been until a few months later, when our parents were killed in the car accident. For some reason Diana had stayed in New York and had kept at least some kind of contact alive. I cut that off. When our parents died, I can well imagine her thinking I never wanted to see her again."

Courtney felt she would do anything to erase the pain in his eyes. "Mark," she began uncertainly, "I wish there was something I could say to help you through this, but I want to be perfectly honest with you. My relationship with Diana was oriented to the present and future. Her past was a closed book. She never discussed it with me."

"I thought as much," Mark said heavily. He seemed to be trying to rouse himself. "But she had someone who loved her. She didn't die alone."

Mark started as Courtney's arm slid behind his neck. She sat up on her knees beside him, one arm going around his shoulders, the other hand pulling his head into the curve of her neck and shoulder. A quiet sigh rippled through him as he accepted her comfort.

For the first time in the long evening, Mark appeared to be aware of the fact

that Courtney was wearing nothing but a satiny, ice-blue robe. His eyes dropped to watch the slow rise and thrust of her breast against the smooth fabric.

Without questioning her motive, Courtney slowly untied the belt to her robe. All she knew certainly was that her desire for Mark was suddenly a bone-deep, almost frightening compulsion. Sweeping the panels aside, she drew his head to her breast.

She bent over him, her hair falling about his face as she gently kissed him. Her head swam with her need for him. He lay against her quietly.

"Courtney, I love you so," he said. Courtney's eyes closed tight for a moment. How she wanted to believe that.

The too-loud volume of the television set pulled Courtney awake in the morning. Knowing Tracey would soon be demanding breakfast, Courtney groggily pulled herself to a sitting position. She groaned when a glance at the alarm clock beside the bed revealed the hour as seven o'clock.

Stretching as she got to her feet, Courtney walked to the closet, reaching inside for her robe. As she tied the belt, seeming to recognize her nudity for the first time, a vision of Mark the night before, flashed before her eyes and Courtney buried her face in her hands.

I can't even blame it on him, Courtney silently despaired. The heels of her hands pressed into her eyes. She remembered the way she had pulled his mouth down to her breast, and the memory caused her to shudder. Last night was a terrible mistake, compounding the one before, and she wondered how they would ever be able to talk objectively.

"Good morning."

Mark's cheerful greeting stopped her cold. He stood behind the stove, looking

as if he belonged there, calmly lifting strips of bacon from the frying pan to drain on a paper towel.

"Hi, Mommy."

"Good morning, sweetheart," Courtney replied automatically.

"Mark cooking breakfast."

"So I see," Courtney said coldly. As Tracey returned to dabbing her finger in the grape jelly on her toast, Courtney said, "What are you doing here?"

"Preparing a morning feast," Mark said easily. Cupping his hand around her elbow, he sat her in a chair and placed a cup of coffee on the table before her, and she felt things slipping beyond her control again.

"Here, love, drink up. We can talk later. Little pitchers, you know." He wagged his ears with his fingers, but Courtney glared at him, momentarily immune to his charm.

When Hannah let herself in a half hour later, she stared curiously at the trio in the kitchen. Tracey's usual perceptiveness was dulled by the novelty of having Mark's company at breakfast, but the tension between the sullen young woman and the silent man was palpable.

"Hannah, would you please keep Tracey with you," Mark asked with a strained smile. "We're going to my apartment for a while. We have a few things to discuss."

Courtney kept her silence through the short trip down the corridor to Mark's apartment, biting her tongue until he closed the door behind them and tugged her by the hand into the living room. She pulled her hand away and they stood a scant yard apart, poised for battle.

"You really have gall, do you know that? Who gave you permission to make yourself at home like that?"

Mark's fingers closed around her arm. "Courtney, listen to me for a minute."

"Oh, no. Not this time," Courtney warned in a deadly tone. Wrenching her arm free, she backed away with stumbling feet. "I'll never give you the chance to manipulate me again, Mark Hager. This morning is the last straw. I tried to work around my anger, to find another way, but now I see there's no point. Why should I try when you never stopped manipulating me, not for a minute before or *after* I found out who you really are."

"I haven't been..." The impatient scowl on Mark's face wavered as Courtney continued her attack, gaining confidence with each long step toward him.

"Oh, yes, you have. Right from the start you have." Stopping only inches away from him, Courtney's hands involuntarily clenched into tight fists as her eyes lowered to the deep slashes at his mouth. She hated the tumble of love words still lingering in her mind that those insincere lips had whispered last night. Last night. The thought strengthened her resolve.

Her own near whisper broke the tense silence. "God, but I hate you for what you've done to me, what you've turned me into," she said slowly, almost wonderingly. Her eyes hardened. "Do you have any idea how it feels to have believed in someone, only to find out you've been lied to from the very beginning?"

"Courtney, damn it, will you let me speak?"

"No. You have nothing to say to me that I want to hear. I know why you started this whole thing. In a strange way, I even understand it, but that doesn't make it any easier for me to accept." In complete frustration she threw her arms up in the air. "And now you're just trying to use lovemaking to make everything better. Well, it's not going to work."

Mark's hand moved to touch her shoulder and something snapped inside

her. Her own wrist stung with the jarring impact of her hand striking his away. "Don't touch me, not ever again. You make me sick, you make me feel disgusted with myself."

Tears were choking her. Mark merely held her close, one hand stroking her hair, the other hand splayed wide against her back.

"What am I doing?" Courtney whimpered. "I don't even know myself." She pulled in a deep breath and then jerked her head up when she realized the comfortable prop it rested against was Mark's shoulder.

"We have to talk sometime, Courtney."

Much calmer now, Courtney said firmly, "No, we don't, Mark. There's nothing between us now."

"There was nothing between us the past two nights?" Mark asked quietly. "They were among the most beautiful times I've ever spent with you, Courtney. I don't believe for a minute that you don't love me every bit as much as I love you. It took great love for you to put aside your own hurt and comfort me the way you did."

Courtney shot up to her feet, her laugh short and ugly. "Come on, Mark. At your age you know there's quite a difference between love and sex."

The hurt was quickly masked as his eyes narrowed in anger. His breath escaped in a low hiss. "And you call *me* a user. Lady, you've got that market cornered."

He walked away from her and then turned, his arm sweeping in a wide arc of dismissal. He started to speak, stopping as though having a hard time gathering the words, and then said in disgust, "I never hurt you intentionally, Courtney, I never planned anything half as filthy as what you've pulled on me."

Courtney had been frozen, silent and unmoving, through his tirade. Her eyes

widened when Mark said quietly, "Go home, Courtney. Get out of here."

She was out in the hallway, the door being shut firmly behind her, before she could say a word.

"He loves you," she told Tracey, "as much as I..." The realization suddenly hit her that she and Mark weren't alone in this.

It had been three weeks since she had seen Mark. A friend in common had told her he had been in Connecticut most of that time but was probably back in the city now.

As Courtney lay curled up on the couch with a magazine one evening Tracey sat down beside her and leaned her head against Courtney's arm.

"What's the matter, baby? Nothing to do?"

"No." Tracey's eyes were fixed on her bare toes as though they were new, fascinating discoveries.

"Want me to read you a story?"

"No," Tracey repeated stubbornly. "Where Mark?"

Courtney winced. Not again, she thought despairingly. When will she stop asking? "Mark's been working very hard lately, honey. I've told you that already," she explained in a neutral tone.

With her arms clutched about her mother's neck, Tracey said mournfully, "Mark not love me, Mommy. He gone."

Oh, God, Courtney moaned silently. She forced her voice into a loving, chiding tone. "Mark loves you very much, young lady. Now, sit up and listen to me. You're the most special little girl in the whole

world to him. He loves you just as much as I..."

The realization hit Courtney with terrible, defeating accuracy. She and Mark weren't alone in this. As much as she hated admitting it, there were three people's lives involved, not two. And the third person was too young and impressionable to come through it unscathed.

Taking a deep breath, Courtney cupped Tracey's face and tilted it. Kissing both wet cheeks, she coaxed, "Don't cry, sweetheart. It'll be all right. I promise."

Tracey was off her lap in two seconds, tiny bare feet planted wide apart on the floor in firm challenge. She pursed her lips, and said, "You call Mark?"

Manipulated by a thirty-one-inch-high child, Courtney marveled, slowly getting to her feet. Silently she walked to the desk, Tracey at her heels. When the number she dialed began to ring, Courtney put the receiver in Tracey's impatiently outstretched hand.

Tracey's accelerated words were a shouted jumble into the phone she held with both hands, and Courtney wondered if the excited babble was even faintly understood by Mark. Finally Tracey thrust the phone at Courtney. "You talk," she commanded.

Courtney's hand tightened around the cool plastic as Mark's voice vibrated in her ear. "Courtney?"

"Yes, Mark." Was this her voice, Courtney wondered, so calm and quiet? "Tracey wants very much to see you. Can you come over?" There was a long pause and she added, "It's all right, Mark. She needs to see you. Then perhaps we can talk later."

"I'll be right over."

Tracey was already at the door, impatiently twisting the locked knob. Whatever doubts Courtney still harbored evaporated as she leaned against the

frame of the opened door, watching Mark bend to receive the tiny body hurtling toward him. Over the pale, shiny head buried in his neck Mark raised his eyes to Courtney and silently mouthed the words, "Thank you."

She nodded and turned back into the apartment, unable to watch the scene any longer. It hurt, Courtney admitted, to realize that someone else had so much importance in Tracey's life, that someone else could make such a difference in her sense of well-being. And yet, when Mark carried Tracey into the room, setting her down on the floor before pushing the door shut, Courtney felt even that pain ease at the happiness shining in Tracey's eyes. The time for pettiness was over.

"Tracey has about four hundred things to tell you," Courtney said with what she hoped was a natural smile. "Come in and sit down, please. I'll, uh, make a snack."

After a half hour of trying to divide her attention between work that was going nowhere and voices she was trying to ignore, Courtney was almost relieved when a shadow fell over the table and she looked up to see Mark lounging in the doorway.

"Hi. Is Tracey sleeping?"

"Not really, she's pretty wound up."

Courtney pushed back her stool to stand up. "I don't doubt it. She's really missed you."

For a brief second Mark's eyes seemed to be asking more, and then the veil came down as he said, "Thank you for calling me, Courtney. To tell the truth, I was afraid she'd forgot all about me."

"Can we go into the living room to talk?" she asked suddenly. "I don't want Tracey to hear any more than she already has."

Leaning against the door, he stood with his fingers jammed in the pockets of his jeans. "Let's not dredge up old battles, Courtney. I suggest we concentrate on

finding a way to be civil to each other for Tracey's sake."

Just for Tracey's sake? Courtney longed to ask. "I agree. Our differences have really hurt her." He seemed so far away from her.

"Then you have no objections to my seeing her?"

"No, no. I should have realized before what the separation would do to her. She needs both of us."

"I'd like to have Tracey over to my place tomorrow evening for supper."

"She'll be ready."

Mark pushed himself away from the wall as he said, "Then I'll pick her up at five."

Courtney nodded, watching him walk away. She felt numb.

Mark had stopped by each of the past four nights. He spent an hour or two with Tracey, even staying to dinner one night. But as Tracey went to bed, Mark went home. Last night was the closest they had come to starting a conversation, but it was over almost as quickly as it had begun.

The following evening, after he had again put Tracey to bed, he asked Courtney to join him at a faculty party he was going to.

When he returned to pick her up, she stood poised nervously in the doorway, gaining confidence by the second as Mark slowly walked toward her, his eyes registering his approval.

"Ready?" he asked softly.

"No," Courtney blurted. Color rose high in her cheeks. Her voice was nearly a whisper. "Please... please kiss me."

Before the words were completely out of her mouth, Mark bent his head to hers, his hands running up her arms to her shoulders. His lips were soft and giving, and the kiss ended much too quickly for Courtney. "Oh, lady, I have missed

you," he breathed.

Her fingers smoothing away a tiny bit of salmon-colored lipstick from his mouth, Courtney smiled. "Hey, you know what? I'm looking forward to this."

Mark's answering smile held nothing back. "Me too, angel. Me too."

The evening was friendly and fun, but only once during the taxi ride home did Courtney permit her eyes to meet his.

When they reached her apartment door, Courtney opened her purse and fumbled for her keys, her body screaming for him to stay, her mind warning her to let him go, that no good would come of the strange mood between them.

"Let me." Mark's voice rumbled beside her ear. She watched as he swung open the door. He reached inside for a wall switch and they were bathed in sobering, too-bright light.

"Good night, Courtney."

"Mark..."

"If you hadn't called me back, I would have gone crazy," Mark said fiercely.

Courtney couldn't breathe. His hands left her hair, one splaying wide against the curve of her spine, the other hand searching for the tie to unwrap her dress.

When Mark separated the front of her dress and released the front clasp of her bra, Courtney's head fell back against the wall. A second later she raised her head as a shock wave of pleasure rolled through her. Her eyes lowered, taking in her crumpled clothing hanging in wanton disarray, hearing the moist harshness of Mark's breath against her flesh.

Suddenly it seemed so ugly, so far removed from the sharing she remembered, and Mark's apparent lack of control was frightening.

Cringing, Courtney's hands shot up to push him away. "Stop it. Oh, Mark, stop."

Mark straightened slowly and Courtney turned away in shame. Her fingers shaking, she sobbed dryly as she tried to pull her clothing together.

"Your body has been speaking to mine for hours," Mark said with cold crudity. "And don't tell me I misread you, because I won't buy it. You want it. You want it as much as I do."

Outraged, Courtney could only sputter, "W-why, you arrogant bastard."

"Me arrogant?" Mark shouted. "You're a spoiled brat. I'm sick of dealing with your insecurities. You can't make up your mind what you want, and you expect me to hang around like some damned neutered cat while you decide."

Courtney was held in thrall by the stunning force of his anger. She was silent as he stalked back to her. "I've had enough, Courtney. I'm sick of watching you battle with yourself. I'm sick of being stroked one minute and being sent on my way the next. You win, lady. I just hope you can live with the victory."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The fight seemed to be draining out of Mark. "It means I'm not going to let you do this to me any longer," he said quietly.

"What are you saying?" Courtney asked weakly.

"I'm clearing out."

No, Courtney thought in agony, oh, no. She couldn't say anything; she just stared at the hard, brilliant blue of his bitter eyes. "What about Tracey?" she finally whispered.

Mark flinched. "It's better this way," he finally said defeatedly. "She'll miss me for a while, but she's so young. Anyway, it's got to be healthier in the long run, better than having her grow up watching the two so-called adults she loves cutting each other up and dragging her into their unhappiness."

It was me, my fault, my insecurity.

Courtney thought wildly, responding to the hurt and self-blame she saw on his face. But still the words wouldn't come. She was standing there rooted to the floor, her eyes stunned and disbelieving, when the room vibrated with the slam of the door.

Courtney hung up the phone after it rang for the tenth time. Where could he be? she thought frantically. It was Monday morning and although she had phoned steadily since Saturday night, Mark hadn't been home. She then called his office to learn that he had neither shown up for his classes nor called in.

As she hurriedly dressed, Courtney's stomach was knotted with legions of warring butterflies at the thought of facing Mark. He loves me, she thought in full and beautiful relief. And I almost threw it all away.

When had she finally believed it? Courtney wondered. Was it something specific, something she still couldn't quite put her finger on? Or, more depressingly, had the knowledge always been there, hidden behind the camouflage of her self-protecting layers of indifference?

Courtney rang the doorbell for the third time, unable to resist the childish impulse to press her ear against the door. She was tempted to bank and holler until he was forced to admit her. When the elevator doors opened she whirled around in relief, fully expecting to see a tall, dark-haired figure emerge. Instead she saw a small man in a brown sweater wrestling a shopping cart over the elevator threshold.

"Hi, Mr. Whitney," she said dispiritedly as the elderly man recognized her and favored her with a wide smile.

"Hello, Courtney. Say, are you looking for Mr. Hager? I saw him leave last night when I came home from my daughter's house. Said he couldn't talk,

that he had to get to Connecticut as soon as possible."

He's walked out on everything, she thought numbly. His job, his apartment... and, most of all, his unhappy association with her.

"Oh, Mark. I'm so sorry."

Courtney's words sounded alien, but at least they jolted her out of her lethargy. Her fingers were trembling so badly that she misdialed the phone and had to start over again.

"Hannah? Please, would you take care of Tracey? I have to go to Connecticut. Oh, God, Hannah, he's gone. He's really gone."

"Courtney, calm down," Hannah instructed. "How are you going to get there?"

"I don't know. I'll, uh, rent a car, I guess. Look, Hannah, I've got to go I'll—"

She searched his face, humbled beyond words at his gentle, loving expression. "I don't deserve you," she said.

The first thing Courtney noticed when she pulled into the driveway and drove around to the back of the big red house was that Mark's car wasn't there. The second thing to intrude into her despair, as she cut the engine and sat looking at the house, was the slow, stunning realization that the kitchen windows were lying on the ground, shards of glass and wood. The gaping window frames were black with soot.

She left the car in slow motion, her

nostrils twitching at the odor of burned wood and smoke that became heavier as she neared the building. What on earth... Mark will be devastated, she thought sickly.

She stiffened at the sound of a car pulling into the gravel driveway. The engine died and a door opened and closed. Courtney's eyes grew wild with uncertainty as footsteps ran up the porch stairs. Her back was to the door and she turned slowly when it swung open, dreading the sight of rejection in his eyes.

"Courtney, What..." There was such surprise in those two words that Courtney couldn't read any expression on his blank face. His eyes were wide, the color in them deepening as he examined her face. Still uncertain of her reception, but determined to make the first move, she walked to him slowly. When she whispered, "I'm so sorry," he reached out and pulled her against him.

"How in the world did you find out about the fire?" Mark asked wonderingly. "Never mind. It doesn't matter." His arms tightened. "I'm just so damned glad you're here. I really needed you today."

"I didn't know—I just knew you were gone and I was frantic. I came to find you. I thought... I thought you'd left me for good," Courtney said brokenly.

Mark buried his face in her free-flowing hair. "I was going to give it a try," he admitted with a sigh. His arms loosened to reach up and cup her face with his hands, tilting it up to him. "I was furious with you."

Stopping his words with a fierce kiss, Courtney then held his lips closed with a tender finger. "You have nothing to explain." She searched his face, humbled beyond words at his gentle, loving expression. "I don't deserve you," she said painfully. "How can you be so endlessly

patient with me?"

"It's not always easy, and Saturday night proved that I don't always succeed, but I happen to love you."

Courtney framed his face with unsteady hands. "And I love you. With all my heart."

A long, jagged sigh flowed through him. Courtney kept her eyes locked to his until his arms pulled her so close her breath caught. He rocked her gently for a long moment until Courtney pulled back just enough to see his face, her arms still wrapped tight about his waist.

"I've loved you for so long," Courtney confessed. Confusion muddled the dark waters of her eyes. "I don't understand what's wrong with me, why it took me so long to believe that we could work, that we could be happy." She couldn't hold back a shudder of fear. "And I nearly lost you."

"Are you sure now?" Mark questioned. "No more doubts?"

"None," Courtney said emphatically.

"Then that's all that matters," Mark said quietly.

They both looked about in silence until Courtney smiled tremulously and turned Mark's face back to hers. "We'll fix it together," she promised. "We'll fix everything."

"Just promise to keep telling me you love me," Mark said. "Nothing else seems to matter anymore beyond the simple fact that you finally came to me on your own and that you have me." Her eyes opened in dazed gratitude when he added, "It wipes away all the hurt to have you here, angel."

"I'll never leave you, never push you away again," Courtney whispered. "I felt I had lost half of myself when I thought you were gone." She bent to find his lips, opening her mouth to his. ♥

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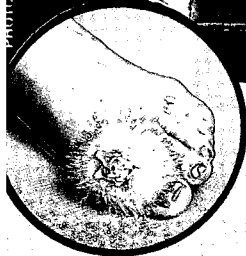
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